

Shadows

by Indie-FF-ORIG-Author-Xtra

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Summary: Four years after being extracted from the Forerunner Shield World Trevelyan, Fred-104 and Kelly-087 are sent on a mission to rescue one hundred kidnapped Gamma Company Spartan-III's. But neither of them is in charge. Those they are being sent with belong to a team they have encountered off and on over the last thirty years

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## 1. Prologue

Shadows

by UNSCShadow-105

AUTHOR'S NOTE: You know (or should) what belongs to the official Halo peeps (that's 343 these days, right?). The Shadows and at least the names of the 21 Gamma Company Spartan-III's belong to me, as do the Shadows. I write until the Muses release me from their headlock. Sometimes that means one thousand words, and sometimes it means a hundred thousand words. I am but the Muses mouthpiece. If you think having Cortana in your head can be interesting â€| that's nothing compared to my reality!

**\*\*Prologue\*\***

**\*\*Mental Journal Entries\*\***

**\*\*September 2517 through March 2553\*\***

September 30, 2517

I've been gone a week or so now. One minute I'm falling asleep in my bed and the next I'm on a ship.

They say I am going to be a soldier. Be the UNSC's best chance. And that I cannot return to my family. None of us can. Some of the kids

have tried to run. Not me.

I'll write like this a long as I have to. Where they can't see.

Here they don't use our last name. I have a number. Sorta neat, actually.

104

July 14, 2523

Today we played a game of Capture The Flag. Seems I am considered the team's second best sniper and the best spotter. Very cool!

Sometimes I wonder if I should run away. There's something important there, but I can't think of the name of the place that used to be home or what is so important there. I'm only twelve. I tell myself it's okay because maybe with me gone, things will be easier. Half the stress. Then I wonder what that even means. I don't even look like I am twelve. I think that's why we never get R&R or anything like that. We are the UNSC's best kept secret.

I miss something. I have all these brother and sisters that are the same age as me. But different. None of them has my eyes, and sometimes that bothers me, and I don't know why. I should tell someone. Chief Mendez or Dr Halsey, but if I do that, I don't know if they will think I am crazy, and if I am crazy I can't be a Spartan.

I'm not afraid of anything anymore. Well maybe one thing. I just can't remember what. Whenever I get five minutes to just rest and think, I try to remember. But those times are so few. Every time I do it's like a little less is there.

Fred-104

March 2525

So many of the Spartans have washed out. More died. This mission cost us so much. I won't list the names. Maybe I can forget them if I don't think of their names. I forgot every other name I knew before, so why not theirs? No. That won't work. I'll never forget them. Ever.

We've been augmented. It's hard to move. My head hurts. My eyes hurt. Everything hurts. Silver in my hair.

I need to rest. Soon I will compose another entry or exercise or whatever these things I do in my head are called. I wish I could write and send, but I know I can't. I don't even know who I would sent it to. Something some\_one I have tried not to forget since the moment I woke up and realized that I wasn't in my room. When they took me in the night. And made me a Spartan.

All that is left are eyes. But maybe that's just the pain.

Fred-104

September 14, 2525

I'm on my way back from our first mission, and we won! We got Colonel Watts. Yes, I killed people. That's what I have been trained to do. Insurrectionists have to be stopped. We had to breach an airlock to get away. That killed a lot of civilians. We were in sealed suits, so we were alright.

Now we're in the Pelican and on our way back. John was shot, but he'll be alright. He always is.

Fred-104

March 31, 2526

The strangest thing happened a couple of days ago. We were sent to Arcadia to stop insurrectionist activity. They have some incredible jungles there and that makes a good planet side hideout for rebels. Apparently they had some old fashioned paper files that Section Three wanted bad enough to call us in to collect them.

Well, we went in at 23:58 and found the base by 01:15. It was very small and for a minute we all thought that we had made a mistake, or that our intel was bad. We took out the outer guards, and were heading into the base itself when we were gassed. Best way to take out Spartans.

First thing I noticed when I woke up is that we were immobilized. Collars used by prisons. Very effective against Spartans. We'll have to watch out for that, but it won't be easy. If we miss the gas â€¦ not a lot we can do after that.

Me, John, Kelly and Linda were all sat up far away from each other that we couldn't touch. And we couldn't communicate. We could see through our visors, and talk aloud to each other, even though we didn't, but that was about it. Somehow they had deactivated our helmets. We weren't recording.

There were ten men in this cabin they held us in. The only thing around us were them, eight crates of contraband guns and ammunition, our guns and ammunition, and a file cabinet, which was what we had been sent there to go through for the files, I bet.

But we were neutralized. All we could do is listen to the leader brag about having captured four Spartans. He told us he hadn't expected them to send us, which made me wonder who he had been expecting.

Some of my questions were answered when a sudden commotion broke out outside the building. General Coffee, or at least that's the name he gave us, sent a man to see what was happening, and through the open door I saw at least five men and a few women laying on the ground as if they'd been hit by sniper fire. I was in a good position to see â€¦ I don't know exactly what it was I saw, but the man was thrown back in with a thick crossbow bolt in his chest.

Another man ran to close the door but was kicked back inside. We all saw the man hit him square with two feet to his sternum. He used the body to right himself, and he landed lightly beside the body, then slammed his black boot into the fallen mans throat while he turned and slashed the throat of a third man who stepped forward to stop

him.

By the time the remaining seven men began to react there were three antagonists in the room. Another man and a woman, judging by their shapes. They were wearing a form fitting black armor, a lot like what we used to wear before we got our MJOLNIR armor. But they had no guns. As we sat there paralyzed and unable to move, they took out every man in the room except the General using only bladed weapons.

One of the men was of average height. I think the tallest among them was a less than a quarter of a meter under my own two meters tall. Big for a human that isn't augmented. The woman was short. Maybe a meter and three quarters at most. She took out three of the men by herself, and was the one to neutralize the General. With a nod, she ordered the men to restrain him, and they dragged him to his feet while he struggled. She was the one in charge, that much was obvious.

A silence had fallen then, and I realized that these people must have neutralized the entire camp. I saw a few out of the open door, kicking bodies to see if they moved and using their knives to make sure they were all dead.

Very thorough. Deadly. Almost like Spartans, but they weren't Spartans, and I knew it.

The woman ignored the General struggling between the two men, and turned to us. She stared at us each individually, but it seems she stared at me for the longest. I could see then that she and her team were wearing four blades; two on their thighs and two on their calves. As they turned I saw another just above the generators at the bases of their spines, but I couldn't identify it. Just the blades; two combat knives and two stilettos. While they were functional, as I had seen, they were also beautiful. I appreciate good blades. But I was confused because the UNSC doesn't use stilettos. Not for centuries, if ever.

"Are any of you injured?" she asked, again looking at our faceplates. She couldn't see our faces inside, but we couldn't see theirs either. They didn't wear helmets. Their form fitting armor extended to a tight cowl that covered every bit of their faces, except their eyes, I assumed. Those were covered with goggles. Their noses and mouths were covered by something almost like old fashioned gas masks, but different. Matte black, just like the rest of them. Lightly armored and almost no bulk on them. Some kind of stealth team.

"We're fine." John replied, and she turned her head to look at him. "You can release us now." he all but ordered.

I don't know if she smiled, but the fabric around her mouth wrinkled a little bit. "No rush, John-117." she stood and looked at each of us. "You, Linda-058, Kelly-087 and," she again looked at me the longest. "Fred-104 are all fine and will be released in due time."

"How do you know who we are?" Linda demanded.

The woman turned, and headed for the file cabinet. "Who doesn't know a Spartan when they see one?" she answered the question with one of

her own.

Her men snorted slightly as they held General Coffee. "They aren't as famous as they probably will be." one spoke up and I don't know if his tone was resentful or respectful. "I doubt they will be secret for too long, the way things are going." his goggles turned to us. "But they will never be what we are."

Without looking at the man, she rifled through the files. Then she took out an entire drawer and brought it to the General. "No, they are the best chance for the UNSC and humanity." she seemed to agree with him. She set the drawer down, and looked at the General. "You were going to expose us." she seemed to be chiding him. With her back to me, I could see the cylinder over her generators. But I still didn't know what it was.

He sneered at her. "I don't know whose worse." he growled. He looked for a minute like he was going to say more, but she gently reached up and touched his bottom lip and he fell silent at once.

"That depends on your viewpoint." she replied conversationally, and reached for the cylinder at the small of her back. "Spartans will be the heroes of this war. They will be placed in the history books, and mankind will forgive the sins that created them." she removed the cylinder, and held it slightly away from her back. "History will never know about us. As it should be. To quote Horace, 'Pulvis et umbra sumus.'." she looked up into his confused face. "We are dust and shadow, General Coffee." she translated a second after I had done it in my head.

Behind her, I saw her thumb move and a short arch of energy appeared. It looked to me like an Elite's energy dagger, except it was not mounted on her wrist like theirs are. The men holding him released him and backed off just as she stood, swinging the plasma blade gracefully in a narrow arc and very neatly decapitating the General. His head landed with a thud and rolled a little bit away.

"Alexander, take the General's head and the rest of the squad to the extraction point. Ralf and I will finish the mission, tend to the Spartans, and be ready for extraction in ten." she turned the blade off and returned it to its place at the base of her spine.

The taller of the two men nodded and collected the General's head. He tucked it under his arm. For a second he looked at me, John, Linda and Kelly, and then he nodded and left. Through the door I could see him joined by four others. They talked among themselves, and then moved off to the north. It had been a seven man team, and had taken out fifty at least. Not bad.

"Ralf, go get that can of fuel we saw." she nodded to the remaining man, and he turned and vanished as she turned back to us. She took a step away from the file cabinet drawer and knelt in front of us, still stuck sitting on the damn floor. "To answer your question, Linda-058." she canted her head. "We know who you are because that is why we were created. To know."

"You said you were dust and shadows." John replied instead of Linda, being the highest ranked among us. "You're ONI."

This time there was no doubt that she smiled and it was accompanied by a small laugh. "No, we are not ONI. Not Section Three. We are â€¦." she paused and I could see Ralf return with a large can of fuel, as ordered. She didn't move. "What are we Ralf-131?"

He straightened. "We are ..." even he paused, as if considering. "ONI's greatest fear? Section Three's wet dream? What they would do if they were not held back by military ethics?"

She nodded. "All of that, and more." she agreed. She looked at John. "We are a â€¦ branch of the UNSC that the UNSC does not even know exists. And that you four would be well advised not to report to your superiors. If they don't order psych exams for the bunch of you then they will kill you for being even more paranoid than that which created you." she straightened, and turned back to the drawer moving to pick it up. "Which reminds me, Ralf. Double check that their helmets did not record anything they shouldn't have."

While he did that, she found a match and lit the contents of the drawer on fire.

"Hold on a minute! That's important information!" John protested, but there was nothing he could do. There was nothing any of us could do.

The woman was poking at the papers to make sure it was all burned to ash. "It's dust and shadows now." she dumped the drawer to make absolutely sure there was nothing left, going so far as to crumble the charred paper between her lightly armored fingers. The slight breeze coming from the door increased as the wash from some kind of ship that looked like a Prowler, but definitely wasn't. The wash blew the ashes everywhere.

Ralf-131 finished checking our helmets. "Which one do we release to release the others once we're gone?" he spoke from behind Linda. "Can any of them be trusted? How deep is their indoctrination?"

She didn't even pause to think. "Release Fredrick-104 first." she ordered, and stepped forward as he moved behind me. "All of you remember this." she told us all. "If you speak of us to your superiors, they will probably call for a psych exam, which will be placed forever in your record. Your brother and sister Spartan's will forever worry that you have cracked, being spooked by shadows. It will effect your ability to be an effective Spartan. None of us wants that, least of all you." she looked from one of us to the other. "Tell them that by the time you got here, General Coffee had burned the papers they sent you to collect. There are no computers here, so there are no computer records. All was lost, Spartans. You will never know the service you have done for the UNSC, and humanity today. But we thank you." and she nodded to Ralf.

He released my collar, but did not remove it. "You're free, cousin." he spoke softly even as he moved like the wind with the woman out the door and on to the exfiltration craft.

Since the craft was lifting off by the time I was on my feet, I didn't pursue. I released John, Linda and Kelly, and we checked the cabin for our weapons, which we found easily, and any scrap of paper remaining.

Nothing.

We had nothing left to do but return without the papers. Our helmet cameras had apparently malfunctioned just as we were being gassed.

In the debriefing that followed, I know that we all gave them the story that the woman had given us. She had made sense and we could not explain it at all. In this case, truth really was stranger than fiction. Fear that her words would come true kept us silent.

But when we were out of armor, we talked about it with some of the other Spartans. None of us know who these people were, or who they reported to. Kurt nicknamed them Shadows. It fits. I bet if he had been there, he could have gotten them to tell us something. He has a way with people.

Fred-104

April 27, 2526

The Corbulo Academy of Military Science is gone. And the Covenant glassed Circinius IV. Kelly and I didn't do much, but after we dusted off, I took off my helmet. So did Kelly. The cadets stared at us, and one asked how old we were. "That's classified." was Kelly's reply.

I doubt they would have really believed that we were so many years younger than them, even if we had told them.

Fred-104

November 8, 2531

Kurt is gone. Floating someplace in all that black. As many times as he saved my life, and I couldn't do anything to save him. It's no death for a Spartan.

I don't even know what day it is. I'm so â€ I don't even know the right word to use.

Fred

February 13, 2535

We've been extracted from Jericho VII. A little disappointing, as we were winning on the ground. But we always do. From orbit, they glassed the planet. In space, Spartans don't do so good.

I'm twenty-four now. I forgot my own birthday until it was over. Maybe it's a sign of old age? I've been doing this for almost twenty years now. Doesn't matter. Spartans don't retire, I don't think.

Fred-104

August 30, 2552

I've stowed my gear, and have half a second. Our mission got scrubbed. That's never happened before. Makes me nervous.

F

September 7, 2552

I pulled groundside duty. Wanted the space op, but Kelly beat me to it. I'm heading up Red Team instead. Our landing was hard. Twenty-seven of us jumped. Four Spartans died just landing. We had to abandon our landing craft, so 'hard' is probably an understatement.

My suit got damaged, and I had to take from Malcolm in order to fix it. He would have wanted me to, but I didn't like having to take a part from a fallen brother.

The Covenant started glassing Reach with us still on it. We're dug in here. Now they're digging us out. Or trying to.

But we're here. Me, Kelly, Vinh, Isacc, and Will. And Dr Halsey too. I don't know why we treat her like military sometimes. Maybe she is like a mother figure. Whatever that means.

We're trapped in some kind of cave with Dr Halsey under the mountain. She taught us to play a game called Twenty Questions, but she stopped. I think we beat her too often. She hates to lose.

Back to examining this damn wall.

F-104

November 3, 2552

I don't even know where to begin. So many dead Spartans. Dr Halsey stole? Took? Kelly. We're back on Earth now. Been here a week, at least.

Just so busy. But it keeps my mind occupied.

Fred-104

November 8? 2552

I'm not even completely sure of the date. But I think I got it right. We're in some kind of bubble. More science than I can understand. Most of us are dead, I think. Kelly and Linda are here with me. Chief Mendez too. And some of a new kind of Spartan. The III's. Kids. They're kids. The oldest two, Tom and Lucy, are a little more than half my age. The youngest are maybe fourteen. But they're Spartans. I was twenty once. And fourteen. And younger. But those memories are old. Like most everything else, they fade with time.

Seeing their armor made me think of the Shadows. Over the years we have run into them no more than half a dozen times, but it was always when we were sent to retrieve some kind of information that ONI wanted. It was always paper, and the Shadows always beat us to it. Twice they even beat us to the place, and we would arrive to find nothing but bodies and charred, unreadable paper.

For a couple of years we thought they might be that next generation of Spartans Chief Mendez was supposed to be training, but now that I



see the Spartan-III's, I know they are not. Whatever those men and women are, they are not fighters. At last not like we are. I think their whole reason for being is to stop certain things from reaching the wrong eyes. And those eyes always seem to be ONI Section Three. They get in and out without being seen or heard, and avoid engaging the enemy. Over the years their armor hasn't changed much. Still light, but now they have active camo that is almost second to none but the Covenant.

Lucy would love them.

I have only encountered them twice. Both times that woman was heading the team. She has been reported on four of the six missions where they have been encountered by Spartans. Of all the names we have gotten among ourselves, hers was never one. I wonder if she even has one.

And I wish she and her team were here now. I bet they could get us out of here. Seems like this is what they were created for.

Fred-104

March 4, 2553

John dead. Dr Halsey arrested. Serin back from the dead. Maybe that means there's hope for John. Our records are now open to us, if we want to see them. I might remember the eyes that I dream about sometimes. Like mine. Maybe they are mine. The eyes are the window to the soul. Who said that? I can't remember, but in here I will have an eternity to figure it out.

As far as the records go, I declined to look. For now. Maybe whatever I forgot was meant to be forgotten. For my own good.

Fred-104

## 2. Chapter 1

Shadows

by UNSCShadow-105

AUTHOR'S NOTE: You know (or should) what belongs to the official Halo peeps (that's 343 these days, right?). The Shadows and at least the names of the 21 Gamma Company Spartan-III's belong to me, as do the Shadows. DAI is also mine, mine, mine! I write until the Muses release me from their headlock. Sometimes that means one thousand words, and sometimes it means a hundred thousand words. I am but the Muses mouthpiece. If you think having Cortana in your head can be interesting â€| that's nothing compared to my reality!

**\*\*September 25, 2556\*\***

Fred got out of the Warthog with Kelly, and together they swept the area. A lot of trees out here. Too many ambush points. He wondered if becoming such a high ranking officer had dulled Serin's instincts. But he simply did not know her as well as other Spartans, as they had all thought her dead until, four years ago.

He heard the roar of the Pelicans engines, and saw it immediately. With Kelly, he watched it come in and land, and again wondered what kind of mission this was going to be that it had to begin with a meeting in the middle of the night in a secluded patch of wood.

The Pelican landed and the hatch opened, but for a few seconds, he didn't see anyone. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Serin stiffen slightly. In a moment a man walked out, just not one Fred recognized. But as the man approached, she only murmured. "At ease, Spartans."

He and Kelly both relaxed. They were on Earth after all. As the man came closer, Fred was able to make out his uniform, which was pitch black with a dark gray shirt, and a tie that matched his jacket and pants. It was also very clearly a General's uniform. And automatically the two Spartans stiffened.

"Vice Admiral Osman." The man's voice was rough from cigar smoking, Fred suspected. "Now I know this mission is truly blessed." He was old. Fred suspected that he was seventy years old. At least.

Kelly opened a private COM. "Army?"

Osman looked at him and shrugged slightly. "General Fleay." she returned the greeting. "She said your people were the one best suited to get this done, and get it done right." she hid her nervousness well.

The General nodded. "And she is correct." his eyes moved from Fred to Kelly, and then back to Osman. "Fred-104 and Kelly-087." Fred was a little taken aback. Few could tell Spartans apart with their helmets on. "Good choice in 087. Please give the Admiral my deepest gratitude."

Fred thought he detected the slightest bit of sarcasm in the General's voice. "She told me you wanted Fred and one other. Kelly was available." Osman replied. This man made her nervous. Kelly also.

"I trust they are ready to go." the General ignored her comment about requesting Fred specifically, but it certainly made him curious.

"Of course." Osman replied.

The General arched his eyebrows, as if he doubted it. "I cannot trust the Admiral, despite her years of unflinching ..." he paused, and waved a hand casually in the air, searching for the correct word. "Penance." he nodded, as if satisfied with the word. "But I had been sure that I could trust you. Was I wrong?"

"If you know so much, then you know that they are as ready as I have been able to make them. They know that a ship of a hundred Spartan-III's was hijacked two days ago. Senior Chief Petty Officer Franklin Mendez was on the ship. They know that, too." Osman replied.

Fred heard a voice then. Not in front of him, but behind he and Kelly. As it spoke, he and Kelly both whirled around and trained

their weapons on the source of the noise. "But you didn't mention that they would be working with Shadows."

The figure was small, and dressed exactly as she had been the last time he'd seen a Shadow. Black on black. She was leaning against the Warthog as if she'd been there for some time, even though Fred hadn't heard her approach, and neither had Kelly. He would think that they were simply getting old, but one thing he'd learned from dealing with these people was that they were as silent as vacuum.

He never knew they were Army, however.

"No." Osman replied, turning and looking slightly ruffled by the woman's appearance.

The woman pushed herself off of the Warthog and strode forward. "Begging the Vice Admirals pardon." her voice was neutral. Neither polite nor impolite. "We don't have a lot of time. Your Admiral has given us command of this mission. Please trust that I will not waste the lives of the Spartans." she paused, and looked to her left and right, at Fred and Kelly. "Any of them."

Osman looked down at her. "I don't even know your name..."

The General took a step forward, closing the gap. "Major Frank, take the Spartans, and go. As you have pointed out, time is of the essence." Fred was glad to see the woman — the Major — snap into a sharp salute. "I will see the Vice Admiral safely back." he returned her salute. "Be dark and silent, Shadow." it seemed to Fred to be both an order, and a farewell.

"Yes, Sir." Major Frank agreed. Without turning to the Spartan's, she began walking to the Pelican. "Grab your kits and let's go Spartan's." she called over her shoulder. "We have work to do."

Fred hesitated only a moment before he, and the Kelly did just that, grabbing the bags they had packed. Two regular uniforms and the usual accessories, and then followed the Major to the Pelican. Inside, he looked out of the door as it closed to see the General and Vice Admiral get into the Warthog and drive away. Then the door closed, and the Pelican was in the air.

The trip up into space was absolutely silent. Fred allowed himself to relax very slightly. Pre-mission jitters were nothing new, but this mission was quite different than any he'd ever encountered.

He barely saw the ship as they approached it. It was a Prowler, although it looked slightly different than the ones he was familiar with. Something he could not identify hung below the ship, making it look pregnant. But a Prowler was a Prowler, and seeing it meant that this was a stealth mission. Not something he had expected until he had turned in the wood and seen a Shadow.

Finally the Major spoke. "Gloaming, this is Noir-One." her voice was glass smooth. "On approach with Noir-Four and Noir-Five. You ready for us?"

A male voice replied. "Roger wilco. The guest bedrooms are clean and we put fresh towels out. Over."

With the hint of a grin in her voice Major Frank replied.  
"Outstanding. Now open the garage door, and I will grab the paper off the front lawn on my way in. Over and out."

The docking was smooth as you please, and Fred followed Major Frank out of the Pelican. Another Shadow was waiting to greet them. He saluted the Major. "Good to see you back." his hood was pulled back, his goggles were up on his forehead and the piece that usually covered the mouth of the Shadow was pulled down and to his left. Fred noted his red hair and green eyes, but it was his voice that triggered memories for him. "And welcome, Spartans. I am Captain Ralf-131. It is good to see you two alive and well."

Fred nodded. "Thank you, Captain." he replied, and felt an odd twinge at the formality in his voice. "It's a good to see you .." he paused.

"\_At all\_?" Kelly interjected. "We know you two, don't we?"

Ralf nodded. "After a fashion." he replied. "We will explain some of that once we're underway."

"Captain Alexander, we're home." Major Frank called, speaking into her COM.

"Roger. Entering slipstream space in ten minutes." came the same voice. One that Fred did not recognize.

Major Frank turned and glanced at the Spartans. "Then we'll begin our briefing in fifteen." she blew out a breath. "It will take us almost a day to get where we're going." she didn't sound happy about that. "That will have to be enough time for us to learn to work together." she nodded at Fred and Linda. "Welcome to Noir Team, Spartans." and she walked out of the hanger bay without another word.

Fred could feel the ship accelerating. He looked at Captain Ralf-131. "You have designations like us?" he asked.

"We do, but we are not Spartans." Ralf replied. "All of it will be explained, Lieutenant. Or may I call you Fred?"

No one had ever asked that question before. "We're on the same team, so yes. Call me Fred." he glanced at Kelly and saw her nod also.

"And call me Kelly." she agreed.

Ralf nodded and smiled very slightly. "Then we're off to a good start. Let me show you around the ship. It's not big so I'll end it with the briefing room."

The Gloaming's briefing room had seats for a dozen, but not one of the five of them took a seat. Fred stood beside Kelly and they both looked at Captain Alexander. That face was familiar to him, and he was trying his damndest to place it. So many years.

At the head of the table, Major Frank was watching them watch Captain Alexander. Fred took a second to note that her eyes were the same color as his own. "I suppose we should begin this briefing with you, Alexander." her voice was almost soft.

Dark eyes looked out of a dark face. He nodded. "I didn't think you would remember me after all these decades." he spoke softly. "You thought I was dead."

"Spartan-073." Kelly whispered and placed her hands on the conference table, as if to steady herself. "You died. The augmentation killed you."

Alexander looked at her and sighed. "The augmentation blinded me." he spoke slowly, as if remembering. "I woke up and I couldn't see. My eyes felt like someone was slicing little holes in them. Stabbing me." he stopped for a full two seconds before he continued. "That's when I knew I had washed out." he shook his head. "Or I could be used at a desk, somehow. Or retired." he shuddered very slightly. "What would you have done?" he looked across the table at both Fred and Kelly.

Neither of them answered, but Fred could not imagine what his life would have been like had he washed out. He knew that Fhajad-084 had gone on to do incredible things, but Fred could not imagine it for himself. Blind. Unable to fight.

Alexander nodded, apparently able to read their thoughts through their faces. Neither Fred nor Kelly had been very good at concealing their emotions. "Exactly." he spoke softly. "I wanted to die. And I was laying there, knowing I was blind. Knowing I was one visit shy of being officially a wash-out." the corners of his mouth twitched. "When a nurse came to visit me. He told me I could still fight. That he could restore my sight, and make the pain vanish. But it would mean leaving the Navy. Leaving the Spartans." he licked his full lips. "I was angry at Dr. Halsey. Angry at Chief Mendez. Angry at you, and all the Spartans who had survived." he stopped, and paused a second. "I told him I wanted to serve or die. And I asked him to help me to do one or the other." another seconds pause. "He slipped a bottle of pills into my hand, and I took them without caring what they would do. I figured he had chosen death for me, and I was ready."

"Suicide?" Kelly sounded absolutely flabbergasted. It was not Spartan thinking.

"I thought so." Alexander replied. "But I woke up. In another hospital. But I could see! I could see, but it was different. The nurse from the other hospital was there, and he told me I wasn't a Spartan anymore." he paused and motioned to Ralf and Major Frank. "I was a Shadow."

"What did they do to you?" Fred asked, looking at Alexander's eyes, which looked normal to him.

"After they restored my sight, they transplanted the tapetum lucidum of Panthera onca into my eyes." he again motioned to Ralf and Frankie. "An addition made to every Shadow."

Kelly was looking more than a little bit shocked. Fred found himself feeling outraged himself, but then his thoughts went back to his own augmentations. "Which â€¦" was the only word he could think of.

"It made us nocturnal. Like the big Earth cats. Natural night vision." Ralf replied and canted his head, as if waiting for something. For it all to sink in.

Kelly looked at Fred, but said nothing for a good ten seconds. "So he could serve ..." she whispered. "But â€| he was â€| there was a service ..."

"I guess I got kidnapped twice." Alexander shrugged. "Shadows aren't even in the Army's direct line of sight, and the Shadow program was hidden as deep as the Spartans. Deeper. They told the \_universe \_about you. Never \_us\_." he nodded. "When we were around Spartans, my name was spoken, but I was under orders not to reveal myself. Alexander isn't the rarest name in the known universe..."

"So we never found out." Fred murmured. Alexander was the tallest Shadow he'd ever personally seen, and was only slightly shorter than Fred himself was. "I'm just glad to know you aren't dead."

"As are we all, Fred." Major Frank's voice remained soft. "I am glad that Spartans are so quick to adapt to change and shocks. Which brings me to the next thing you need to be briefed on. "Shadows." she paused, and looked around the table, her eyes ultimately resting between Fred and Kelly. "Let me begin by saying that, as spies and infiltrators go, \_no one\_ is better than DAI." he began. "But this information is classified, and I expect you to respect that."

"Of course, Ma'am." Fred replied, with a nod. He had already guessed that the Shadows were with the Department of Army Intelligence. Pronounced "die" by the few who ever spoke of it at all, it was rumored to be a department you only wanted to be in if that is what you wanted to do â€| die. But Fred had long ago also guessed that propaganda worked in mysterious ways. And they were competition for ONI.

"DAI and ONI have several things in common. One of those things is a super secret program designed to create super soldiers from children." The Major continued.

Fred knew that his jaw had dropped. Did that mean that DAI had done the same thing that Dr Halsey had done? He nodded, opting to say nothing.

"Our candidates, and the ones Dr Halsey used were very identical. DAI's pool was larger, but the number ultimately chosen was smaller. Many of the names on her list were also on ours." she motioned to Alexander. "Halsey moved faster. She has the patience of a civilian. And she got to you all first."

Still nodding, Fred remained stock still, as did Kelly.

"DAI opted to take a 'wait and see' position, especially to see if her clones took or not. Our plan had been to simply abduct the children. Kids go missing all the time." she sighed slightly. "I do believe you already know that the clones all died in time."

"Yes, Ma'am." Fred whispered, his voice rough to his ears.

"In the end, DAI opted to flat out abduct sixty children. Less than ONI. Twenty-one died during augmentation. Four were rendered

incapable of active duty. We had thirty-five active of the first generation. After three generations, we have currently a total of ninety-three active duty Shadows. Of the first generation of Shadows, we had only two volunteers. One at the beginning and one who came to us during augmentation." he looked back at Alexander.

"Shadows aren't like Spartans." Alexander spoke up. "They didn't get the Muscular Enhancement Injections, the Carbide Ceramic Ossification or the Catalytic Thyroid implants. None of the surgeries. But they did get the rest. Their skeletons are different. Plus they played around with our hearing. You hear better than any normal human being." he shrugged. "We hear better than a Spartan." Biting his lip he sighed. "And of course our ocular implants. Your eyes adjust very quickly to low light conditions. We see in the dark like cats do. Overall, they went through less pain than you did because they didn't want them big and strong. They wanted them light, quiet and sneaky."

He took it all in, nodding slowly. "But you are a Spartan." he almost felt like he was arguing.

"No. I'm not." he spoke with absolute certainty. "I am just the largest and heaviest Shadow. But I can still serve." his face twisted into a crooked half grin. "I am the loudest of the Shadows as well, but I am still dark and silent compared to Spartans."

Major Frank lifted a finger. "Which brings us to the third part of our briefing, which we can worry about once we have reached our destination. I'd hate to arrive, and find that my plan of action has holes in it large enough to pilot a destroyer through." she spoke dryly. "But while we wait â€| we will work to make Noir Team a well oiled machine."

### 3. Chapter 2

Shadows

by UNSCShadow-105

AUTHOR'S NOTE: You know (or should) what belongs to the official Halo peeps (that's 343 these days, right?). The Shadows and at least the names of the 21 Gamma Company Spartan-III's belong to me, as do the Shadows. I write until the Muses release me from their headlock. Sometimes that means one thousand words, and sometimes it means a hundred thousand words. I am but the Muses mouthpiece. If you think having Cortana in your head can be interesting â€| that's nothing compared to my reality!

Becoming a well oiled machine was not as painless as Fred remembered it to be when they had first donned MJOLNIR armor. Then again, they had been a team long before that, and they had all gotten the same armor to use together. As a team.

The Shadows armor wasn't even like the Spartan-III's Semi-Powered Infiltration armor. As far as he could tell, it wasn't armor at all, even if it was capable of active camouflage. It was like the form-fitting, lightweight polymer body armor that the Spartans wore very early in their career. A heating/refrigerating unit would hide or mask their infrared signature, and it would deflect a small

caliber round. But their armor also had a camouflage generator. No where near as bulky as the one in SPI armor, and somehow integrated into the polymer armor. The downside was that Shadows could mask their infrared signature, or they could camouflage. They couldn't do both at the same time.

However, Fred quickly found out that Shadows were as light as he thought they had been. MJOLNIR armor, by itself, weighed in at half a ton. Shadow armor weighed in at less than a quarter of that. They could go places that Spartans could not, and in ways that Spartans could not simply based on their size and weight.

After the comparison/contrast discussion, Ralf crossed his arms. "We are comparing apples and beef." he groused, and tapped on Fred's chest plate.

"That's why we have never fought together before." Alexander replied, as if the Shadows had discussed this before now. "We are completely incompatible."

"No!" Frank held up her hands. "We can be. Think about it. What do Spartans and Shadows represent?"

Ralf and Alexander both frowned. Kelly looked at Frank. "Convergent evolution." she suggested.

Frank pointed at her. "\_Exactly\_, Spartan!" she moved three hundred and sixty degrees on her axis, taking in all of them. "Dr Halsey created her Spartans using her own ideas and innovations. General Fleay did the same with his Shadows. We have more ..." she paused, as if considering the word.

"Subtlety?" Fred suggested.

She snapped her fingers. "Precisely. Spartans are very hard to miss." she stated the obvious with finesse, Fred had to admit.

Alexander blew out a breath. "Alright. I thought I would fail because I was so large and clumsy." he remembered. "But I learned to adapt. After a year or more." he emphasized, looking at Frank with meaning.

Her shoulders rose in a shrug. "So we don't teach them to be Shadows. Why would we want to? Spartans are beautiful, finely honed weapons. Let them be what they are." she suggested.

Kelly looked at her for a long time, and Fred could see admiration in her eyes.

And so it was decided. The Spartans would be used on the ground, where they would be the most useful. Shadows would be just above. In treetops, rooftops and power lines.

Two hours later, Fred felt as if he knew who he was working with, and what was expected of him within the team. After three, they could almost read each others minds. Frank had insisted that they do this before they all got on the same COM. Learning to communicate and anticipate.



What followed was six hours of uninterrupted sleep. There was no need to enter cryo-sleep, as the trip was not going to be that long. And even Shadows could sleep when and where they needed to. But the Gloaming, as it turned out, had very nice quarters for their crew, including the Spartans. In the event of an emergency, the Gloaming's AI, Erebus-7 would wake them all. Fred knew that would not be difficult. He doubted that Shadows slept any deeper than Spartans did. The slightest word, movement or sound, and they would be wide awake and ready.

However, he had not expected to be awakened by Reveille. The ancient call was only about twenty seconds long, but Fred had never known it to be played anywhere within the UNSC. Regardless, by the time it had finished he was on his feet and ready to go.

Yet, once he and Kelly found their way to the mess hall of the ship, they found the Shadows already there. Ralf was pouring coffee while Alexander poured a deep red juice. Frank was in the kitchen, cooking.

"Thousands of years of enlightenment. Millions spent on my training. Where do I wind up? In the kitchen. Do they treat the female Spartans like that, Kelly?" Frank half groused, and half joked.

Kelly laughed and reached for a glass. "Pretty much. But the men do the dishes."

Alexander snorted. "Good thing I transferred out then." he drank deeply of his coffee.

Frank snorted, and began filling five plates. "I think you need to wash windows today, Captain." she lined the plates up as if she were a professional waitress, and served them all. "Inside and out."

The food was wonderful, and both he and Kelly complimented the chief. Frank nodded to them. "Before a Shadow leaves their ship to go planet side, we eat well. Something to look back on if we get stuck with nutrition bars."

Fred groaned involuntarily. He absolutely hated those things. But apparently, so did everyone in the known, and unknown, military.

After their 'breakfast', everyone armored up and met back in the briefing room. Once they were gathered at the head of the table, Frank called out. "Erebus-7. Report. How far out are we?"

On the AI pedestal Erebus-7 materialized. He looked like a Nubian prince or something. It was hard to tell as the avatar Erebus-7 had selected was black on black. He looked more smoke than substance. A shadow. "Hello Noir Team." he greeted them. "We will be exiting slipspace in approximately one hour."

"Where exactly are we going?" Kelly asked.

"Yea. Do we know where they are?" Alexander added.

Frank looked around them. "Intelligence suggests that they are on, or

near Emerald Cove." and she paused a moment, as if waiting.

Fred recognized the name at once. It was one of the few periods of downtime the Spartan-II's had ever had during, or after their training. Usually, the memory actually made him smile. But now he looked at the Shadows again, but was stopped by Kelly's voice.

"I assumed Emerald Cove had been glassed, just like . well, everyplace else." she also looked at Alexander, who was looking at Frank.

Frankie looked to Kelly. "Why? The UNSC abandoned it before the Covenant found it and.." her eyes flashed lightening quick to Alexander, and then they cooled and returned to Kelly. "When the UNSC abandons something, they don't go halfway."

Kelly looked as if she were going to say something. Perhaps defend the UNSC. After all, they did all work for it. Then Fred remembered that of all the branches of service, it was the Army that seemed the most neglected. They had even been snubbed at Voi. And within the Army, the Shadows were even more so. The red headed stepchild of the redheaded stepchild.

But the voice that spoke was not Kelly's. "It's the only logical choice from a pirating or innie standpoint." Alexander pointed out. "Frank has eerie instincts about these things. If she thinks they are there, there is a very high probability that they are there."

Fred looked at Frank. "Why Emerald Cove?" he asked. "Besides it's abandoned state?"

It looked to him as if Frank wasn't going to answer him, but finally she answered the question with one of her own. "Do either of you." she looked between he and Kelly. "Know of Colonel Vladimir Sirko?"

Fred hadn't, and the shake of Kelly's head meant she hadn't, either. But Ralf hissed very softly, almost like a cat, and Alexander blew out a breath. Already, Fred knew the Shadows well enough to know that whatever it meant, it wasn't good.

"Erebus." Frank looked at the AI, who waved his arm and a holo of the Colonel appeared.

"Colonel Vladimir Sirko was a member of the UNSC Army until he deserted and joined the Insurrectionists in twenty-five forty." the AI explained as they looked at a man with dark hair and eyes. "He deserted just after he was diagnosed by the UNSC as delusional. As the Covenant war progressed, the Colonel apparently began to believe that he was General Zaroff."

Kelly raised her hand a fraction of a second before Fred did. "General Zaroff? I've never heard of him."

Frank snorted. "He is a fictional character in an ancient tale called The Most Dangerous Game. It's about a big game hunter that stopped finding large game a challenge, and switched to humans."

Erebus-7 nodded from his pedestal. "He was examined by UNSC psychiatrists after kidnapping a squad of ODST's and holding them

captive, slaughtering all but two of them before he was discovered, captured and taken into custody."

Biting his lip, Fred asked. "I assume he went to prison?"

"He was sentenced to death and was en route to the prison planet Alcatraz-1 when pirates attacked the UNSC Leavenworth and liberated him." Erebus explained. "One week ago."

"And three days ago, a ship full of Spartan-III's is hijacked and vanishes." Kelly breathed. "You think he's working his way up?"

Frank nodded. "ODST's would be a challenge to hunt. Spartan-III's would be more of a challenge."

"But Shadows and Spartan-II's would be an even larger challenge." Fred suggested.

The smile on Frank's face was almost frightening. "We will be doing the hunting, in this case, Fred." she stated, simply. "And we will win."

#### 4. Chapter 3

Shadows

by UNSCShadow-105

AUTHOR'S NOTE: You know (or should) what belongs to the official Halo peeps (that's 343 these days, right?). The Shadows and at least the names of the 21 Gamma Company Spartan-III's belong to me, as do the Shadows. I write until the Muses release me from their headlock. Sometimes that means one thousand words, and sometimes it means a hundred thousand words. I am but the Muses mouthpiece. If you think having Cortana in your head can be interesting â€| that's nothing compared to my reality!

**\*\*September 26, 2556\*\***

Everyone was on the bridge when they exited slipspace, stealthed, and arrived at Emerald Cove. Frank ordered Erebus-7 to scan the space around the planet, and when the AI did, he had no good news to report.

"There is a ..." Erebus-7 paused, and Fred didn't like it. "Small Jiralhanae cruiser on the ground on the opposite side of the planet from New Barbados."

No one said anything for almost a solid minute. "What is the estimated compliment?" Frank spoke in a soft voice.

"Based on its size and shape I would estimate that it would be capable of carrying a hundred Jiralhanae." the AI reported. "More or less."

"And if you added a hundred human beings?" Frank asked, her eyes locked on the monitor.

"Then perhaps \_fifty\_ Jiralhanae." Came the reply.

Fred considered. "Now add to that another ..." he paused. "Ten or twelve human beings, a dozen Kig-yar."

"Perhaps forty." Erebus-7 nodded to himself. "By my calculations, \_still\_ too many Jiralhanae for your team."

Ralf placed his hand over his heart. "Erebus. I'm hurt!" he exclaimed. "And insulted on behalf of my Spartan cousins. Forty Jiralhanae against two Spartans and three Shadows?"

Kelly was nodding. "Sounds like even odds to me." she proclaimed.

Frank grinned. "What could possibly go wrong?"

The AI folded his arms and ignored Frank's hypothetical question. "Was part of your genetic screening as candidates for your programs looking for suicidal behavior?" he asked, and paused. "Well it seems they did not, although from your behavior, one would think differently."

"What big weapons do we have aboard, Erebus.-7?" Frank asked, ignoring the AI's psychological evaluation. "You know missiles, and all. Surely we put \_some\_ aboard, considering we were expecting Spartans."

Erebus seemed to consider for half a second. "We \_do\_ have a couple of Scorpion missiles. Not standard on UNSC Prowlers, but it seems that General Fleay was thinking ahead. They are stored in something like an archer pod below the ship."

Fred felt the beginnings of hope. Bravado aside, they were outmatched and he knew it. "Define 'a couple' please, Erebus."

"Twenty-five." the AI reported. "You can't be thinking..."

"We certainly \_can\_ be thinking." Frank was nodding. "Thinking that we could get close to the enemy ship, fire the missiles, and fly away." she paused. "How close is the ship to any humans?"

After a short pause Erebus-7 replied. "One kilometer."

Fred saw the nods all around him. "That's \_plenty\_ of room."

"Provided there are no humans on the ship." Erebus argued.

"Only one way to find out." Frank replied and without another word turned and left the bridge, her team at her heels. In the bay, the Shadows buckled a belt of four plasma grenades to their waists. For them, heavy weaponry.

In the Pelican, everyone buckled up and Alexander got himself in the pilots seat. When the bay doors opened, they shot out into space and, almost immediately both of the ships had again stealthed. Alexander announced that he was heading to a part of the planet between New Barbados and the place where the Jiralhanae ship was because once they were in the atmosphere of Emerald Cove, the Pelican could not

remain cloaked.

Soon trees were flying by as the Pelican flew low enough to brush the top of the jungle canopy. Alexander did not glance back as he gave them a weather report. "Rain ahead. Looks like we were smart to bring Spartans. Their luck is rubbing off on us, Major!" he announced over their internal COM.

Frank gave the thumbs up. "Good. We'll need the cover. Can you land us a kilometer away?"

"Roger Wilco, Noir-One." Alexander replied, and an hour later, he landed them as bet he could in the jungle.

They got out, and immediately they all took cover. Fred watched as Frank, who had left the Pelican ahead of the rest, jumped straight up and vanished, presumably into the tree tops. He and Kelly took cover at the base of the large trees. Noir Team began to head in what was arbitrarily west, towards the ship and, with luck, the prison camp.

Sheet rain made hearing very interesting inside of Fred's MJOLNIR helmet. After forty-five minutes of movement, he had to stop and turn up the volume. "Say again, Noir-One." he requested, as he was sure it had been Frank that he had heard.

"I've got a single contact at extreme range." Frank seemed to be screaming, although the rain easily made it a whisper. "Anyone else?"

"Negative." came four acknowledgment lights. Followed by Alexander asking. "What's your position, Noir-One? Over."

"Twenty meters up a tree. Looks like I'm fifteen meters to the west of Noir-Three." came the reply.

Fred realized that he and Kelly were actually further behind than he thought, and he began to move a bit faster, seeing Kelly moving as well.

"Copy. Give me two to get to your location." came Ralf's voice.

In two minutes, during which the rain slackened only slightly, Ralf spoke again. "I'm eighteen meters up, and ten meters from you Noir-One." he reported. "Noir-Two, you're coming in at extreme range. Same with Noir-Four and Five. Your location, Noir-Two?"

Alexander responded. "I'm ten meters north of Noir-One. Twenty from you, Noir-Three."

Fred nodded to himself and turned. He could see Kelly moving as well. On the ground they caught up to the Shadows. "I'm five from Noir-One and Noir-Three." he reported. "Noir-Five?"

Kelly replied immediately. "I'm between Noir-One and Two." she reported.

"Outstanding." Frank's voice came through. "Lets move forward, slowly."

They did. Five minutes later Frank's voice again came over the COM.  
"Hold, Noir Team."

Fred stopped moving, and peered out into the rain. He could see clearly for five meters, and then it got hazy through the rain. He increased his magnification and realized that he could see a large figure about fifteen meters in front of him.

"I see single contacts at Twelve, two, four, six, eight and ten o'clock. Closest to me is fifteen meters ahead. In the middle and down maybe five meters is a bunch of contacts. Not sure how many. Confirm." Frank reported.

Fred clicked his acknowledgment light and so did the others. "Looks like the outside contacts are Brutes." he spoke low. Being this close to Jiralhanae made him anxious. The beasts were not easy to fight.

Acknowledgment lights greeted his statement, which means he wasn't the only one to identify the threat as Jiralhanae.

"Gloaming, come in." Frank called their ship.

"This is Erebus-7. Go ahead, Major." came the unflappable voice of the ship board AI.

"Have you detected any more ships in range?" she asked.

"Negative. The ship at your position is the only one in my range." Erebus-7 replied.

"Come on down and engage, Erebus. Give 'em all you can on the first pass." Frank ordered.

"Roger Wilco. Standby." came the immediate reply.

They waited, maintaining their position and staying out of sight. Five minutes clicked off of Fred's mission clock. Six. Then seven. A nav point appeared on Fred's heads up display where he knew the brute in front of him to be standing. It was marked N-1-4.

"I've marked your targets." Frank explained over the COM. She'd apparently picked more than one, assigning teams. "Shadows, plasma grenades to the head. Spartans, short bursts. Get their attention. They are not armored. When they turn around and come towards you, retreat. We'll take it from there, if needed. On my mark."

Two acknowledgment lights greeted her immediately. Fred and Kelly hesitated, but complied. Glancing at his mission clock, he noted nine minute since the Gloaming began its descent.

Suddenly a series of explosions sounded even through the pounding rain. Fred did not make a move, but the Jiralhanae guards began to move towards the sound.

"Mark!" Frank yelled and a second later Fred could see the blue-white glow of a plasma grenade sticking to the head of the Jiralhanae that she had hit.

It turned around, screaming and looking for whoever had thrown the

grenade. He saw Fred and began to charge. Two seconds later the grenade detonated. While the grenade successfully blew away the back of the Jiralhanae's head, the impulse did not seem to reach the rest of the beast. Fred fired three short, controlled bursts, backing up a meter after each one. Six seconds later, the Jiralhanae fell face first, his body finally catching up with the fact that it had been killed.

"Three down, three to go." Frank's voice came over the com.

Before she could say another word, Erebus-7's voice came calmly over the COM. "Enemy ship disabled. No movement detected. It was empty."

Frank's voice was terse. "Roger. Out." and Fred suddenly saw two Jiralhanae coming out of the rain, both with plasma grenades glowing on them. The first one detonated, taking a large hairy arm with it. Then the second, doing the same damage to the other Jiralhanae.

Backing up, Fred began to shoot, and saw something flash out of his periphery vision. Still firing at the center of the mass, he realized that each Jiralhanae now had a Shadow riding on its back. Both of the Brutes suddenly began spraying blood from their necks, and turned to attack the first thing they could see. Fortunately for Fred and the Shadows, that turned out to be each other. As they pushed off the backs of the bohemeths with their legs, the Jiralhanae reached with their remaining arm ripping out the others throat.

"Two." Frank panted just as another detonation reached their ears. She turned and ran with Fred and Ralf to Kelly's position. She was standing with Alexander looking down at a headless Jiralhanae.

"I. Hate. Brutes." Alexander panted.

"We got all of them, I think." Frank blew out a breath. "Great job, Noir Team, but we're not done."

Fred noted six more contacts break away from the blob, and head in their direction.

Suddenly the Shadows were gone, back up into the trees, leaving Fred and Kelly on the ground. But they knew they were not alone and they separated themselves, blending into the trees. A few seconds later, Fred could visually see five of the six contacts as the rain began to slack off even more and visibility improved. They were human, and running fast towards them. His heads up display told him that the sixth was hanging back.

After decades of fighting creatures like Sangheili, Mgalekgolo and Jiralhanae during the Covenant War, going up against human beings struck him as a very easy thing to do. He could see that the Shadows had returned to their original positions, which is what he and Kelly had done. It only took a second for a nav point to peg one of the five humans approaching. His assigned target. But Frank did not speak a word.

"Points for flair." Ralf's voice sounded slightly amused.

It was all over in about five seconds. Fred and Kelly stood with one

each dead at their feet, while all three Shadows were squatting beside their own.

"That was almost \_boring\_." Alexander spoke dryly.

"So who is that sixth one?" Kelly asked, taking a step forward. "And what about the group of contacts that was the center?"

"Let's find out." Fred suggested, and began walking towards the contact.

"Be careful." Frank cautioned. "In \_The Most Dangerous Game\_, the General used traps in the jungle. Pits and snares. Use caution."

Kelly paused. "Like large leaves to camouflage a pit?"

"Yup." Ralf confirmed.

They quickly found two, and uncovered the holes. At the bottom of the pits were large spikes that appeared to be made of Titanium-A. Once they were uncovered, they moved cautiously along.

"I got a trip-line here." Alexander's voice sounded calm.

Fred looked down, and saw one barely two meters in front of him. "Got one here, too."

"Alright. Hold position." Frank ordered, and in a moment Fred saw her approaching. She stood between him and the line, and they both followed the line. He saw a large log that, had he tripped the line, would have swung down and cracked him in the middle of his back. By the looks of the log, it may have drained his shields by maybe a quarter, but it would have made him stumble into the large man-pit just beyond the trip line.

"Trap neutralized." Alexander reported as Frank motioned Fred to take cover on the far side of the larger tree supporting the trip-line. Frank sliced through the line, which looked like plain rope. The log came flying between the two trees.

"And here, too. Trap neutralized." Frank reported. "Keep your eyes peeled, Noir Team. It looks like that contact is waiting for us to come to them." and Fred watched her shimmer and vanish. She'd activated her suits camouflage.

Their caution slowed them down, but in five minutes they reached the edge of a clearing. A man stood waiting for him, an assault rifle in his hand, but the barrel was pointing towards the ground. He was short and stocky. Well muscled, but the gray in his hair betrayed his age to, most likely, be in his fifties. A smile appeared on his face as Alexander and Ralf approached him, clearly visible, with Fred and Kelly on either side of them. Fred could see a pit behind the man. A lattice work of energy beams criss-crossed the top of the ten meter diameter pit.

"Splendid! I always like watching you, especially when you hunt aliens." he commended, as if the team was a group of students he had been teaching. "But why did you bring Spartans?" he obviously knew Alexander and Ralf, if not individually, then as Shadows.



Alexander stood with his arms at his sides. "Colonel Sirko, where are the Spartan-III's." he demanded.

The Colonel shrugged. "Those that are still alive are in the pit." he told them. "The Brutes that I hired to help us aren't a very disciplined bunch. A lot of the game was killed in route. More after we got here." he shook his head. "They eat us, you know. Must have driven some of those kids insane. But they are no match for Brutes that are going berserk." He suddenly smiled. "You'll be taking me back now." he sounded as if he were ready to be taken into custody and back to serve his term.

"Not just yet, Colonel." Ralf replied, matching the casual tone. "We want to make sure the Spartan-III's are alright."

"They are perfect." he replied. "I was going to hunt the first one just as the ship blew up and all of my men were killed. The Brutes didn't eat all of them." he sounded more annoyed than anything. "And now .. what do you have planned for me?"

Alexander took a cautious step forward, and hesitated only slightly as the Colonel pulled out a pistol. "Relax, Colonel Sirko." he used a calming tone of voice.

"Take me back? To the doctors, and their medications?" The Colonel asked. "Or will you hunt me yourself? No â€¦ I wouldn't make \_near\_ as challenging game as your kind makes to me. But one of us is to furnish a repast for the hounds."

Fred did not believe that an unaugmented human being could move so fast. Before any of them could move, Colonel Sirko raised his pistol to his left eye, and pulled the trigger. The round took the back of his head off. Blood and bits of brain matter flew backwards, some of it stopping suddenly as it hit the camouflaged Frank.

She turned off her active camouflage, leaning slightly to the right, as she had dodged the bullet. "Well, that was easy." she murmured. Turning around, she looked at the energy grid. "Fred, you and I will walk the perimeter, and look for a way to turn off this grid. The rest of you look around just in case we missed some of the Colonel's men."

Three acknowledgment lights winked on and Kelly, Alexander and Rolf moved off. Fred began to move clockwise around the perimeter while Frank went counter-clockwise. As walked, he looked down into the pit. The light from the energy rods made it impossible to see inside and there had been no sound from inside since they had arrived. His heads up display indicated that there were several contacts in the center, but he couldn't tell if they were human or otherwise.

Opening a private channel to Frank, he murmured. "Are we assuming there are \_humans\_ in here?"

"Not really." she replied. "Sirko likes hunting big game. For all we know there antelopes down there. But it's a good bet."

They continued their walk, and met at the other side. A control panel stood three meters distant, glowing a soft green in the light of the now rising sun. Looking at it, Fred noticed many controls. He knew

better than to just randomly start pressing buttons. It could easily be booby trapped and, if the erratic behavior of the Colonel was any indication, it probably was.

Frank looked at the panel with interest. "The first time we encountered the Colonel, there was a pit like this, full of his men. Twenty of them died when the incorrect password caused twenty spears around the perimeter to launch through their bodies." her voice was neutral. "The second time it was ODS'T's and some native local insect that burrowed into the skin and sought a direct path to the victims brain." she raised her head, and looked out over the pit.

"Disturbed." Fred whispered. "So, no matter what we do, we're going to lose some of them?"

"One hundred meter sweep complete." Alexander's voice suddenly spoke over the COM. "Plenty of traps, but no contacts."

"Roger. Find us. The colonel left us another puzzle to solve." Frank commanded, softly.

Ten minutes later, they were all gathered around the control panel. "Another of these things?" Ralf growled softly. "What's waiting this time?"

Frank shrugged. "Doesn't matter. We have to break it." she inhaled very slowly. "The first time." and she allowed her hand to flutter over the control panels keyboard.

Kelly watched her. "Couldn't you have your AI figure it out?"

Erebus-7 replied himself. "What do you think triggered the second trap, Spartan?"

Fred winced inside of his helmet. Alexander turned his head towards Frank. "Let me do it."

"Negative." Frank replied, simply. "Mine is the most senior neck to put on the chopping block." she flexed her fingers. "Last time we tried a password." she flexed them again. "Maybe its not a word."

"A pass\_phrase\_?" Fred offered.

Frank didnt answer him. "First word out of his mouth was splendid." she whispered. "Last word out of his mouth was hounds." her fingers flexed again, and then she stabbed the screen. A box popped out with the word 'password' and a box below it to type it out. Below that was a ten second countdown.

"We are dust and shadows." Frank whispered as her fingers flew over the keyboard. But that isn't what he typed. Fred watched her fingers, tensing in case he had to move quickly to save the occupants of the pit. What she typed made no sense to him.

The other will sleep in this very excellent bed. On guard, Rainsford.

On the screen everything vanished, and was replaced with more

text.

Rest In Peace Vladimir Sirko

And the energy screen vanished.

Frank's head dropped while the others gave an audible sigh of relief. "Never had a doubt, Major." Ralf patted her on the back, and they moved towards the edge of the pit.

The sun had risen even more, and the sunlight was more than adequate to see into the pit. It was twenty meters deep. At the bottom, faces looked up at them, blinking in the light.

Of the one hundred missing Spartan-III's, Fred counted only twenty-one remaining. More than two-thirds lost. But what made his heart leap for a moment in some combination of joy and relief was the face that moved ahead of the group.

Senior Chief Petty Officer Franklin Mendez.

## 5. Chapter 4

Shadows

by UNSCShadow-105

AUTHOR'S NOTE: You know (or should) what belongs to the official Halo peeps (that's 343 these days, right?). The Shadows and at least the names of the 21 Gamma Company Spartan-III's belong to me, as do the Shadows. I write until the Muses release me from their headlock. Sometimes that means one thousand words, and sometimes it means a hundred thousand words. I am but the Muses mouthpiece. If you think having Cortana in your head can be interesting â€| that's nothing compared to my reality!

Very little was said as the Spartan-III's were helped from the pit. Mendez was the last to be liberated, and when he stood, Fred noticed the stress combined with relief in his face.

"I'm glad to see you, Lieutenant." Mendez looked at Fred. "And you too, Kelly." he paused and took in the Shadows. "Thanks for the rescue, but who are your friends?"

Fred considered his answer, but was saved by Frank. "We are dust and shadows, Chief." she had not yet taken off her mask. None of them took off anything. But she could see Mendez's face fine. "We are called Shadows, Chief." she motioned to Ralf. "That is Ralf-131. And that is Alexander-073." she paused, and Fred found himself curious about her number designation, which he had not heard yet. And for a moment, it looked as if she might not give it. She turned to Alexander. "Triage the Spartan-III's and then get back here to examine Chief Mendez." she ordered, calling to him.

Alexander saluted. "Already on it, Major." and he returned to looking at a Spartan-III with dirty blond hair. Or maybe it was just dirt.

The Chief looked at her intently and she reached up, pulling her

goggle and mask back and her mouth piece down. "I am Frank-105." she looked at him and Fred caught a flicker in her eye while he remained stock still. There had been a hesitation before she spoke her name and designation, and Fred wondered why, except for the potential confusion that her having almost the same number designation as he did.

But the Chief only nodded, very slowly. "So you're the one in charge of," he motioned, taking in the Spartan-III's, II's, Shadows and himself. "All this."

Frank nodded. "I am." she confirmed. "This is a combination ONI and DAI operation."

The Chief's eyes widened. "DAI?" he sounded taken aback. "They don't have operatives like you."

With a slight shrug, Frank ran her fingers through her silver and black hair. "Shadows are not as well publicized as the Spartan-II's were, nor are we quite as â€¦" she paused, and glanced back at the group of young Spartan's. "Specialized as the Spartan-III's." she put her eyes back on Mendez. "But it is the Spartan-III's that we came here for." and she turned, put her headgear back on and began to walk towards the Spartan-III's.

"To liberate them." Mendez called.

Ralf walked up. "That too, Chief." he stopped, and glanced up at Fred. "We're almost ready to take them back to the Pelican. Then we're going to find a place to camp." he paused. "Any suggestions?"

After a pause of his own, Fred suggested the place where the Spartans had trained once long ago. Where Chief Mendez had stolen their tanks, they had stolen his back, and the Spartans had indulged in a rare week of rest and relaxation. It was a fond memory of his, but he wondered why they were not returning to the Gloaming.

"We aren't taking them back to the Gloaming?" Kelly asked, always quick.

"Not for a while, no." Ralf confirmed but said nothing beyond that.

Alexander walked up with Frank. He reached out for Mendez's hand and the Chief hesitated. "Don't worry, Chief." Alexander assured him. "I am a medical doctor. As is Major Frank."

While Mendez relaxed, he did look at Frank. Fred was also, as the two Shadows having medical degrees was news to him and Kelly. Mendez nodded and relaxed, but asked. "So what else is in the plan, ma'am?" he asked, looking past Alexander at Frank.

"Don't worry, Chief." Frank told him. "I think you will approve of the results, even if you do not agree with the initial plan or execution of that plan."

The Chief's eyebrows shot up. "What the hell?"

"Noir Team." Frank interrupted. "Let's move em out! Kelly, you take

point. You're piloting when we get to the Pelican."

The journey to the Pelican, and then to the campsite was spent mostly in silence. All of the Spartan-III's seemed to be silently taking in their new circumstances. Mendez put on his poker face. Fred did a bit of his own thinking.

At the camp site, Frank ordered Alexander and Ralf to set up memory plastic cubicles along the shore of the small cove by which they had stopped. It didn't take very long. A couple of the smaller ones, Fred assumed would be officers barracks. The Pelican would probably serve as an office.

Finally Ralf and Alexander returned to the group and explained aloud to all that Fred's guess had been correct. "We'll get a latrine while you all get settled." Ralf told them.

"Thank you, Captain." Frank stepped forward while the two Captains walked back into the Pelican. In a moment they returned with a storage container. Once it was opened, revealing bars of soap, she spoke again. "Welcome to Camp Liberty." her voice carried through the air. "This is going to be our home while we sort through a few things." she motioned to the container. "I want you all to grab a bar of soap and hit the water. Bath and laundry, then we will meet in the center of camp in thirty." she paused, but the Spartan-III's did not move. Frank took in a deep breath, and nodded. She looked at Chief Mendez.

"Move it, Spartan's!" he barked, and they all moved then. Frank nodded her thanks to the Chief.

"You too, Chief, but you have ten minutes. Then I want you back here. We have a few things to discuss, and not much time to discuss it in."

"Ma'am, yes, ma'am." Mendez double timed it into the water.

She turned to Alexander. "Can they eat?" she asked him quickly.

"Yes, ma'am." he replied. "They haven't eaten in a couple of days. I would suggest something mild."

Frank nodded. "You two on K.P. Go!"

The two Shadows first double timed it into the Pelican and then back out with two large boxes, running into the forest by the waters edge upstream from the twenty-two bathers.

At last, Frank turned to the Spartans. "I am going to need you two on this." she told them. "So you're with me. Rescuing them was only the beginning of this mission. And the easiest part of it."

## 6. Chapter 5

Shadows

by UNSCShadow-105

AUTHOR'S NOTE: You know (or should) what belongs to the official Halo peeps (that's 343 these days, right?). The Shadows and at least the names of the 21 Gamma Company Spartan-III's belong to me, as do the Shadows. I write until the Muses release me from their headlock. Sometimes that means one thousand words, and sometimes it means a hundred thousand words. I am but the Muses mouthpiece. If you think having Cortana in your head can be interesting â€| that's nothing compared to my reality!

Despite being someplace in the middle of his sixth decade, Mendez was still amazing, Fred thought. The Chief quickly washed himself and his clothes, and was back at the Pelican in eight minutes. He came into it and sat down.

"Better?" Frank asked, mildly.

"Much, thank you." Mendez replied. "A bath and clean clothes go a long way to making you feel human again."

Frank nodded. "Some food will also help. Chow in about twenty minutes." she glanced at Fred and Kelly with the slightest of grins. "I expect that the fishing on this planet is probably better now than when your Spartan-II's took their R&R here."

Mendez scowled, somehow still mildly sore about that, even decades later. Fred and Kelly had taken off their helmets, and were both sitting, carefully masking their expressions. "So, do I call you Major, or Doctor?" he asked.

"Considering the change in your tone of voice when you use the word 'doctor', and the fact that I am not a civilian doctor in any event, you can stick to Major, Chief." Frank replied smoothly. "But understand this." she leaned forward. "I am no Dr Catherine Halsey." there was something that was almost menacing in her voice, but it made Chief Mendez almost physically relax. Fred and Kelly said nothing, knowing the Chief's feelings about the doctor that had, for all intents and purposes, created them.

For the first five minutes, Frank brought Mendez up to speed on the Shadow program, how they differed from Spartans as well on the status of Alexander as a former Spartan. Mendez nodded, but he was keeping his facial expression carefully controlled. It seemed obvious that Chief Mendez remembered Alexander, even though he'd said nothing to or about him.

"Shadows historically have far more downtime than the Spartans \_ever\_ did." she seemed to be concluding. "As a result, all of us were sent to school to get degrees that might aid us if disaster struck, and peace broke out." Mendez snorted, as close to a laugh as he'd gotten so far. "Ralf has degrees in xenobiology and psychology. Human and xeno." she told them. "As you know, Alexander is a medical doctor specializing in, of course, military medicine." she sat back and placed a hand on her chest. "My degrees are in computer psychology." she paused. "And human psychiatry."

Fred looked at her, as did both Kelly and Mendez. It was Mendez who finally spoke, and his words mirrored Fred's thought at least. "ONI sent a doctor, a therapist and a shrink to liberate kidnapped Spartan-III's." his voice was carefully controlled, but Fred caught a slightly rising ire in it.

Spreading her hands in a sort of 'what can you do?' motion, she replied in an attempt to put him, at least, at ease. "We came with Spartan-II's." she replied, as if assuming the Chief had worried after their safety. "They protected us."

Kelly began to shake her head. "Chief." she looked at him. "Degrees aside, we've seen the Shadows in action over the last thirty years, and I can assure you, they are good. As good as we are in some areas and ..." she paused. "Better in others." she opened her mouth, closed it, and tried again. "They aren't just a doctor, a therapist and a shrink."

Frank turned her head. "Thank you, Kelly. That's very sweet of you." she smiled slightly. "And very true." she looked back at Mendez.

"Be that as it may be." the Chief straightened. "ONI and DAI had to have a reason for sending these three particular Shadows." he darkened slightly. "And begging the Majors pardon, but I would like to know what that is."

Canting her head, Frank looked at the Chief. Fred was sure that she would not reply. Surely that had to be highly classified information. But she did reply, and Fred's jaw dropped right along with Kelly's. "To improve on the frontal lobe modifications of the Gamma Company Spartan-III's by teaching them to work completely unmedicated."

Silence descended for at least sixty seconds. "That's impossible." Mendez finally found his voice. "Without their medication, they could become dangerously psychotic."

Frank raised her eyebrows. "I know this is probably going to sound grossly unprofessional of me. Again, I am not in the same league with the consummate professional that I hear Dr Halsey is, and I know that what you just said is also her opinion. Probably just parroted by you, but ..." she paused and let the sarcasm in her voice wash over them. "Bunk."

Mendez gaped at Frank. For almost twenty seconds, he looked as if he were trying to decide if she meant what she had just said. Fred wondered too. He knew Dr Halsey's opinion that, without their medication, the Gamma Company Spartan-III's would become dangerous. Break down. Was she wrong?

"You. Don't. Know. That." Mendez whispered, and Fred was sure that there was hope in his voice. Hope that Frank was right.

"No. I. Don't." the Major whispered back. Then she raised her voice to its usual volume. "But the worst of the Covenant war is over, and the universe does not need hundreds of genetically enhanced psychotics running around putting down insurrectionists. They need to be re-purposed, Chief." she shook her head. "And I am here to do exactly that. That's why I volunteered for this duty. Because..."

Suddenly bugle music began blaring, cutting Frank's words off. At the first notes, she stood and turned to the open door of the Pelican. Mendez looked towards the sound, and he began shaking his head.

"What is \_that\_?" Kelly demanded.

"Army mess call, Spartan." Chief Mendez sounded both disbelieving, and more amused than Fred could ever remember him being.

In less than half an hour, Ralf and Alexander had hunted for and cooked a meal for almost thirty people. More than half of whom had been on zero rations for days. The fish soup that they had put together was mild, but very filling. Perfect for stomachs that might not be able to handle heavier meals.

Pushing his empty bowl away, Chief Mendez blew out a satisfied breath. "\_Now\_ I feel human again, Major. You and your Shadows are to be commended."

Frank nodded. "Thank you, but don't insult my intelligence by lying to me." she said. "You don't feel \_completely\_ human without ..." she reached behind her, pulled out a Sweet William cigar, and handed it to the Chief.

He laughed. "Where do you get your intelligence?" he wondered as he produced a flint.

"General David Fleay." she replied arching a brow as the Chief inhaled.

His own eyes grew wide. He puffed a few times, and nodded.

Kelly looked at him curiously, and Fred could not deny his own curiosity. "You know an Army General?" he ventured.

Nodding, Mendez spoke around his cigar. "I met him just after I joined up." he told them, and Fred could see the Spartan-III's, who had all been quiet, were listening and trying to appear not to be. "I was in survival training and was." he chuckled. "So \_lost\_ ... I'm beginning to wonder if I'm even on same planet they dropped me on." he nodded. "Well, as I am trying to figure all of this out, I'm also being eaten alive by the bugs. Out of the corner of my eye, I see this \_huge\_ one. I mean body as big as my \_head\_ huge. By the time I got over the size of the thing and shot it, it was getting ready to jump me."

Fred noticed now that everyone was listening. It was very rare to hear anything personal about the Chief.

"I'm looking at the thing, and almost had a heart attack when this voice comes out of the trees telling me I am in the middle of a nesting ground, and if I wanted to live, I would walk softly and follow directions." Mendez continued. "So I did. And once I was safely out, I get another scare when this guy jumps down right in front of me. Almost shot him." he snorted. "Then I realized he was a Second Lieutenant. Army. I guess they were doing some training of their own in those wood. He tells me his name is David Fleay, and he's a new doctor at the army camp I didn't even know was there." he shrugs. "Then he tells me how to avoid the spiders. I thanked him, and he walked off." he shrugged. "Took me another two day to get back to my camp, but I found the Army camp before I did. A day after I got back, my Drill Instructor tells me I got written up. I was thinking that it had to do with how long it took me to get back, but then he



tells me that it was a commendation by some Army doctor. Because I didn't ask for any help. He only told me what he told me because I was in imminent danger of being killed." he snorted, and puffed. "Fleay wound up being doctor to both of the camps because our doctor got himself killed by the same spiders that I ran into." he parked the cigar in the corner of his mouth, and looked around at his audience as if just noticing them. "Been friends ever since, even though he's two decades older than I am." he looked at the Shadow. "You're â€¦. \_his\_?" he asked, sounded amazed.

All three of them nodded. "It was interesting hearing that story from another perspective." Alexander took a deep breath. "Thank you, Chief Mendez."

The meal was over at that point, and the former captives looked much better than they had. They were ordered out into the middle of the camp and stood at attention while Chief Mendez stood with Noir Team, showing his solidarity.

Frank looked at the young Spartans. Even though she stood akimbo, and her stance was very military and commanding, she was still very small, and Fred wondered if she could command the respect she would need to command this particular bunch.

"Gamma Company Spartans." her voice was loud, confident and would not be missed by even the Spartans furthest from her. "I am Major Frank-105, Department of Army Intelligence, UNSC." she began. "You have probably never heard of me, never mind DAI. But we were still contacted and sent on a mission involving you, the Gamma Company Spartans. Unfortunately, before you could be brought to us, your ship was hijacked and you were kidnapped, turning it into a rescue mission."

This was news to Fred, and likely Kelly as well. As far as they knew it had begun as a rescue mission, but it would not be the first time they had not been privy to every scrap of information.

"Before we could get to you, seventy-nine of your number were killed, either by the Brutes, or by the pirates. Their deaths have been avenged." she continued, and Fred noticed some nods among the survivors. Frank paused a moment. "But life must go on. Now that we are together, we can carry through with our mission."

Although no one stirred, Fred knew they had to be curious about what this mission was. He remembered Frank's words to Chief Mendez, and still did not know how achievable that goal was. But his orders were to assist the Shadows in any way possible, and he would follow those orders to the letter.

Frank turned to face them. "You should know that your Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Kurt Ambrose, added a compound that altered your frontal lobes, enhancing your strength, tolerance to injury, endurance and aggression. All of you have been taking medication to keep some of the less pleasant side effects of that part of your augmentation in check."

No one moved, which suggested that they did know what Kurt had done.

"The last time you took your medication was the last time you will

take your medication." she went on to announce to them. "We have none, and none will be given, except by the request of myself or General Fleay." she paused, and looked at them unapologetically. "And neither of us will ask."

A hand lifted with a question, and Frank nodded at the Spartan.

"We've been told that if we don't take our medication, we could exhibit psychopathic tendencies." the girl asked.

Frank nodded. "That is a distinct probability. I won't lie to you." she replied. "However, it is our goal to teach you to deal with these tendencies without having to rely on your medication."

"Unless you're a doctor, how would you know?" the same girl asked with a slight challenge in her voice. Fred saw Mendez frown at her cheek.

"But I am a doctor." Frank told them. "So is Captain Alexander." she motioned to him, and he nodded. "But perhaps more important is that we can relate to you far more than the usual doctor, military or civilian." and she went on to again explain who and what they were and compare them to Spartans.

Again the girl spoke up. "But you aren't a Spartan." she pointed out. "It takes a Spartan to train a Spartan."

"Nancy-G194!" Chief Mendez barked. "That is enough!"

Frank raised one hand. "It's alright, Chief. She has a point." she admitted. "But I am not training you to be a Spartans. Do you think the UNSC needs the hundreds of Spartans that still exist?" she asked, and lifted her head, looking at the twenty-one survivors. "You were created to do jobs that Spartan-II's were too valuable to be used for. The war against the Covenant is over, and the UNSC has found itself stuck with surplus cannon fodder. It is my job to re-purpose you."

The words made Frank wince inwardly, and he saw more than one of the Spartan-III's wince outwardly. But many times the truth hurt more than a lie.

Another hand rose, and when Frank nodded, the young man spoke. "Begging the Majors pardon, but €| re-purpose us to do what?"

It was a valid question. "Right now, all I am worried about is getting you off your medication, and keeping you from killing each other, and us in the process." was Frank's answer. "And that should be the only worry any of you have as well, because detoxifying will not be easy. I can already see that some of you are already going through it."

Fred had noticed the anxiety as well, but had put it down to their ordeal over the last several days.

"For now, fall out. I will be assigning you to teams in the morning." she ordered. "Dismissed!"

## 7. Chapter 6

### Shadows

by UNSCShadow-105

AUTHOR'S NOTE: You know (or should) what belongs to the official Halo peeps (that's 343 these days, right?). The Shadows and at least the names of the 21 Gamma Company Spartan-III's belong to me, as do the Shadows. I write until the Muses release me from their headlock. Sometimes that means one thousand words, and sometimes it means a hundred thousand words. I am but the Muses mouthpiece. If you think having Cortana in your head can be interesting â€| that's nothing compared to my reality!

The rest of that day was spent preparing for the mission at hand. Chief Mendez went with Alexander back to the Gloaming, because he knew the names of the dead, and Frank refused to simply go through a hundred names and uniforms in front of the survivors until she found the right ones. For her part, Frank remained in the Pelican, preparing. Ralf remained with Fred and Kelly. They set up barracks for what would be three seven person teams and two person accommodations for Mendez and the officers. After that, they remained by the camp fishing, hunting and gathering while keeping half an eye on the Spartan-III's.

"That should be enough to last us a couple of days." Ralf announced holding a lobster like creature up. It snapped its claws at him, but wasn't in much of a position to hurt anyone. "By then they will be able to hunt and fish for themselves, and their teams." he placed the creature in a plastic container. "You two are good at this."

"You sound surprised." Fred noted.

"Well," Ralf chuckled. "To tell you the truth, in our training, we were taught that Spartan-II's could never do what we do. Be what we are, because you are not designed to be dark and silent. It was always an insult if our Drill Instructor told us we had all the silence and grace of a Spartan." he shrugged. "Alexander got the worst of it. When we were still in hospital, Frank was calling him 'Spadow'. It took him a year to learn not to let that taunt get to him. And she used it all the time against him."

"She sought him out to harrass?" Fred wondered.

"Maybe." Ralf spoke slowly. "She took an interest in Alexander. Before he came along, she knew more about Spartans than anyone. I'd have bet she knew more than the brass."

Kelly bit her lip. "Some people think that some of our relatives may still be alive." she spoke just above a whisper. Fred wasn't one hundred per cent sure exactly why she said it. It seemed very random.

"It's possible." Ralf agreed. "Almost all of us were conscripted. Our families have no idea if we are alive or dead. I never knew which would have been worse. Knowing, or not knowing. But I don't remember much from when I was six and younger." he paused. "I know you two opted not to read your records." his own voice had dropped, even though there was no need. They were safe even from augmented

hearing.

"Just seems like an exercise in futility." Fred found his own voice lowered. "I don't even remember my parents. Just ..." he heard his voice fade away, and he swallowed. "Wherever I lived was most likely glassed. And what point would there be in showing up to parents who think I died when I was a kid?"

"You could have siblings." Ralf looked at him, carefully.

"They think I'm dead, too." Fred hadn't meant to snap. "I have my family now. The Spartans. And my cousins, the Shadows." he snorted a laugh, hoping to relieve the tension he felt. "Conjecture can be a good mental entertainment, but in the end, it's pointless."

Ralf nodded and stood. "Perhaps." he almost agreed, but something was missing. "I'm going to get these back to the mess. You two pick berries. Don't lose your way, Hansel and Gretel." and he jogged off.

Fred picked up one of the remaining two containers. He started walking, and Kelly kept the pace. "I seem to remember a whole bunch of edible vegetation around here someplace."

Kelly nodded. "Me too." she took a few more steps. "Fred. Did you catch anything in Ralf's words?" she asked, sounding as if she wanted confirmation. Or the opposite.

"He's a lot like us. That's all." Fred shrugged, and spotted a flash of red. "Eleven o'clock"

The bush was full of berries that were almost, but not quite ripe. "Give them a week." Kelly suggested. Then she moved on. "Maybe that's it. I just ..." she sighed and marched a bit further along.

"Just what, Kelly?" Fred asked, keeping pace with her.

For almost half a kilometer, Kelly did not reply. Then she stopped completely, and turned to face him. "About fifteen years ago, I was on a planet. You know how it was back then. We found a small number of civilians, and had to evac them."

Nodding, Fred waited for her to continue.

"There was a man there. He was dying from a plasma shot, and someone was holding his hand. Some kind of clergy, I think. And the man was telling him his life story. We were rounding them up, planning how to get them to the Pelican, but I could not make myself stop listening to that man." she swallowed. "He had lost a daughter. She had died from some kind of genetic something he never understood. By then, it was time to move, and we made a stretcher for him, so he could be evaced. I .. had my helmet on, of course. He couldn't see my face. But he looked at me, and his eyes were exactly like mine." she was whispering now. So quiet Fred almost had to strain to hear it from two meters way. "He was dead by the time we got him to the Pelican, and the clergyman told us to leave him. That he didn't need the body anymore." she bit her lip. A very uncharacteristic doubtful gesture. "I've never forgotten him, Fred. What if he was my father? Is the universe ever that small?" her eyes were slightly wide, and Fred could see her struggle within herself before her training kicked in,

and the walls against those sorts of questions closed inside of her. She turned her head. "Looks like those might be edible." she walked off towards a large patch of dark green leaves.

Fred didn't reply to her. He only helped her gather the leaves. They walked back to Camp Liberty in silence, but once or twice Fred left his own thoughts, wondering if he shouldn't say something. Say anything. Both of them were thinking more than was good for Spartans.

The evening meal was as simple and hearty as the one before. Chief Mendez and Alexander had returned with supplies off of the Gloaming and so, after the meal the Spartan-III's lined up and walked past Frank, who handed them two pair of pants, shirts, socks and underwear as well as one pair of combat boots while calling them each by their name and number and then assigning them to their team. Yoru, Schwarz or Kara. She was familiarizing herself with them, joining names to faces. Mendez stood beside her, and nodded from time to time. Fred noted the approval in his eyes. After receiving their clothes, the Spartan-III's gathered by team in the center of the camp, some distance between their groups.

Chief Mendez stood closest to the young Spartan's. By prearrangement, Frank, Alexander and Ralf stood behind him, and in front of the team to which they had been assigned. Further back stood Fred and Kelly in the gaps between Frank and Alexander on one side, and Alexander and Ralf on the other.

"This training is going to be very different than your initial training, Spartans." Chief Mendez barked. "Each team will be commanded by one of the Shadows. The Spartan-II's will act as advisers. And I." he thumped his chest. "Have once again been put in the position of your drill instructor. I am getting a second chance to help make you the best of the best. A second chance to do to you all of the things I didn't get to during your initial training!" Fred thought his voice sounded somehow both threatening, and eager. "Think about that as you sleep tonight, Spartans! Chief Mendez gets a second bite at your apples!" he turned, and walked to Frank. "Major."

Frank nodded, and stepped forward. "We do things a bit differently than you may be used to. For example, you have heard our Mess Call. An hour before midnight on the military calendar, we also play taps if we are in camp. To wake you, we play Reveille if we are in camp. We will see you in the morning, Spartan's. Sleep well. I know Chief Mendez will."

Mendez nodded, and then barked "Taps in fifteen minutes!Dismissed!"

Yoru, Schwarz and Kara Teams fell out, and headed directly for their assigned barracks. Frank watched them and sighed. "How did I become a C.O?" she grumbled.

"Rank hath its privileges." Ralf teased her. He clapped her on the shoulder. "Evening meeting?"

Frank nodded. "Yea. Lets go in my office."

The C.O's office was in the Pelican. Alexander and Mendez had brought

back the single Warthog from the Gloaming, and it was parked out front. Inside, everyone sat.

"I have decided, as you've all probably guessed by now, to be as honest as possible with the Spartan-III's." she told them. It was no surprise.

"Only with them?" Alexander asked, his eyes moving to Frank. "I agree that honesty is the best policy, but I think that, if we're going to be one big happy family, then we should all be as honest and forthright with each other as possible."

Ralf agreed. "I concur."

Frank narrowed her eyes a moment. "Who died and made this a Democracy?" she demanded to know. "Everything that absolutely needs to be known is known. Nothing else is relevant to the situation."

"Physician heal thyself." Alexander's voice was level.

She looked to him, and then away. "Doctor's orders?" she addressed the question to the front windows of the Pelican.

Fred wondered what they could possibly be talking about. Whatever it was, it was a subject that made the Major anxious.

"I can't order you around any other way." Alexander shrugged, but had the slightest of smiles on his face.

The breath Frank exhaled was explosive, but it was followed up with a nod. She turned her head, and took in Fred, Kelly and Mendez.

"Forgive our cryptic nature. Nature of the beast, so to speak." she inhaled deeply, and looked down at her hands a moment. "I mentioned, when I told you two about the Shadow program, that DAI was looking at many of the Spartan-II candidates that your Dr. Halsey was looking at. Of course, one of them was Alexander, who was later absorbed into the Shadows when he washed out of Spartan training."

Both Fred and Kelly nodded. The conversation had not been very long ago at all.

"I also told you that every Gen One Shadow was conscripted, just like you were." she looked up. "All but two, who volunteered."

Again, they nodded, but Fred's was slower. He felt compelled to reexamine everything he could remember since the meeting back on Earth. As he did, things were coming to him differently. Words took on different meanings.

"Well Alexander was one." Kelly reminded them all. "But you never told us who the other ..." she stopped, and her eyes widened. "Oh. I." it was as close to stammering as any Spartan got.

Fred looked at Frank as if seeing her for the first time. In many ways, he was. When they first met, he had noticed that they had the same color eyes, but he had not taken in anything else very seriously. She was a teammate, but she was not a Spartan. He knew their faces because he had been looking at them all for almost forty years now.

On the other side of him, Chief Mendez let out a long and amazed expletive. "How the hell did I miss \_that\_?" he wondered.

Silence filled the Pelican for almost twenty seconds. "I wasn't asleep, and I held my breath as long as I could when the gas came into the house." she spoke in a whisper not unlike Kelly's had been as they hunted greens earlier in the day. "I just played along. Our parents assumed you'd run away. Dad said you would come back when you grew a set. Which was about a month later."

Fred took a deep breath, and kept examining her face. "You died less than a year later. I didn't even stick around for the funeral. Why should I? It wasn't you. But I couldn't leave it, even to find you." She swallowed, clasped her hands between her knees, and addressed them. "I ran away from home, and in less than a week, I met a DAI operative who took me in. Two days after \_that\_, I was a boot." she squeezed her hands, and raised her head to look into his eyes.

After almost forty years, they were all he remembered. Like looking into a mirror, he stared into her eyes. Exactly like his. But it was more than that. His features, feminized. Smaller. The nose. Mouth. Ears. Cheekbones. He'd forgotten everything but her eyes until just that moment. \_His\_ eyes in \_her\_ face.

Because this was his twin.

His twin sister.

Opening his mouth, he had no idea what he was going to say until he heard it just like everyone else in the Pelican.

"Francis."

## 8. Chapter 7

Shadows

by UNSCShadow-105

AUTHOR'S NOTE: You know (or should) what belongs to the official Halo peeps (that's 343 these days, right?). The Shadows and at least the names of the 21 Gamma Company Spartan-III's belong to me, as do the Shadows. I write until the Muses release me from their headlock. Sometimes that means one thousand words, and sometimes it means a hundred thousand words. I am but the Muses mouthpiece. If you think having Cortana in your head can be interesting â€| that's nothing compared to my reality!

He didn't know where to begin. Once the word â€| the name ... was out of his mouth, a flood of thoughts consumed him and he was very glad to be sitting.

"Fred." she was looking at him carefully. "I am not telling you this for any other reason than the fact that now, things are different. Before, I knew who you were, even if you didn't know who \_I\_ was. And I knew that you opted not to look into your files."

"Serin." it was not a question, really. Although, it could have been.

He was trying to regain his footing, and succeeding. Slowly.

But it was not Frank who replied. It was Alexander. "After Parangosky read Halsey's journal, she gave it to Serin to read. What was in it is, I guess, what it is that made them open up your files to you." he shrugged. "But General Fleay did a very good job of keeping the Shadow's existence quiet. The one who brought us to the attention of ONI was Halsey."

"Her journal?" Mendez murmured. "She wrote about the candidates, if memory serves. That explains Alexander, but not you, ma'am."

Fred looked at the Chief. "We're twins, remember? I'd guess that if she was considering me, she may also have been considering Frank." he ran his hand through his short hair. "One-oh-four and one-oh-five."

"Exactly." Alexander pointed to Fred. "She came close to taking both of you. But in the end, it looks like working on twins was hitting a little too close to Josef Mengele territory for her liking. In the end, she chose you because you possessed more physical strength, and were a few percentage points more likely to survive the augmentations she had planned."

Kelly looked at the deck plates of the Pelican, and Fred straightened. Dr Halsey had created them. She was as close to a mother figure as they'd ever had. What they had learned about her over the last four years alone was disturbing enough to last a lifetime. He suddenly wondered what had happened to her. She was officially dead, but he suspected that she was alive. With the slightest of growls, he pushed her from his mind.

"Anyway," Frank moved the conversation away from Halsey, sounding mildly annoyed the woman had even entered it. "General Fleay was contacted by both Parangosky and Serin. They wanted to know about me. ONI lost track of me once I ran away. So they were curious."

"You met them?" Fred was interested, he couldn't deny it.

"Not on their terms, but yes." Frank nodded. "Parangosky commended me on having known so much for so long, and not going rogue. I would have been a difficult target to neutralize."

"She would have had to use Spartans to get you." Mendez grumbled. "And you'd already had contact with Spartans."

"More than that." Ralf spoke up. "She'd already had contact with Spartans and gotten beyond their indoctrination enough to convince them to keep us a secret, even from their superiors."

"But she's a shrink. Mental manipulation must be food and drink to them." Mendez argued.

Fred canted his head, and looked at the Chief. "When we first met them, we were all fifteen years old. So this had to be before her college."

"A year, but yes." Frank confirmed.

Mendez gaped. "Wow." he pinched the bridge of his nose.



"Spartan's learned their brand of warfare, and we learned ours." Frank sounded almost prim when she spoke. "Shadows occasionally go undercover to get the information that we need to get. As a result, we have greater social skills than the Spartans." she paused. "How do you think we got some of the information we had on the Spartan's?"

Alexander got the conversation back on track. "They learned about Frank, then me. General Fleay told them that we could work more openly with ONI, since we'd been exposed. The snub at Voi was more annoying than anything, but no Shadows names are on that wall." he shrugged at Fred's look. "We are dust and shadows, Fred. Non existent. The secret to our success was in General Fleay's refusal to put us anywhere but on paper. Because of our being the best kept secret in the military, we don't even get medals, campaign ribbons. Nothing. Our uniforms are bare of that, as you have seen. When he finally did put us in a computer, you better damn well believe that computer was not hooked into any network but his own."

"I told you because now that we are working together, there is no reason for you not to know." Frank did not let any of them ponder on Alexanders words right then. "I already knew you didn't want to read your records, and I respected that until now. My decision was selfish. Now that we are in such close proximity, I needed to do a little healing of my own. Alexander is right. The more healed I am, the more help I can be to the Gamma's."

Fred nodded. "I understand why you did it. And I'm not angry." he paused and considered that. "Not at you, anyway." he caught a sharp look from Kelly, but ignored it. "I guess I feel ..." he paused. "Like I should have remembered more than eyes I wound up assuming were my own psychological crap."

Mendez's voice startled him, slightly. "Well, as the only person who didn't begin their military career at six or." he nodded to Frank. "Seven years old, I can tell you that I don't remember much from when I was that age. Memories fade for everyone. Even a Spartan's augmented memory, I would assume."

That made sense, but it still bothered Fred. He knew he'd get over that, or hoped that he would. In the meantime, he had things to do.

"Can this help the Gamma's?" he asked, looking at Frank. Wanting some good to come of it.

She seemed to consider it. "Maybe. It won't hurt them, anyway. They don't need to know, but the information is hardly classified, unless you want it to be."

"Use it." Mendez suggested. "What Spartan wants to hear that they punch like your sister when she was five?"

That comment startled a chuckle out of more than just Fred. He looked gratefully at the man that had been his father figure.

"I remember it differently, but â€¦." Frank grinned. "For now .. it's late. For the next couple of days we will deal with guard duty. Two hour shifts." she looked at them all, the face of command firmly in

place, not that Fred had seen the face of a sister. Maybe he never would. "Fred with Kelly first shift. Then me and Mendez. Ralf and Alexander can wake us all up in the morning. Dismissed."

For the first half of guard duty, he and Kelly had nothing to say to each other. Everything was quiet, and the duty was dead boring, which was a good thing, and a bad thing. He had plenty to think about and sort in his mind. The majority of that was done in that first hour. But after that, Kelly approached him, as he thought she might.

"You're angry at her." it was part statement and part question. He knew that she was not referring to Frank, but to Dr Halsey.

"More annoyed, than anything." he replied to her. "I know now."

"Aren't you thinking of the years you lost?" Kelly looked into the shadows as they walked.

Fred shrugged. "I'm too pragmatic for that, I think." he told her as they turned to make another sweep of the small camp. "And I know I'm not going to waste energy being angry about time I can't get back anyway."

Kelly walked with him. "They know things we don't."

He caught something in her voice. "So pick one and ask, Kelly." he suggested, and was glad there was no bite to his voice. "They would tell you."

She shook her head. "Someone has to be left that doesn't hate her."

"I don't hate her." Fred replied, sounding a little annoyed. "Look, I just found out that I have a twin sister that I completely forgot about. Now might not be the best time to have this conversation with me."

Kelly shrugged, but dropped it. The rest of the duty was silent. When they went to wake Mendez and Frank for their shifts, very few words were exchanged. It was too fresh, and even if Kelly didn't recognize that, both Mendez and Frank did.

When Reveille sounded, Fred realized that at least the news hadn't effected his sleep. But he was a professional, and knew how to catch sleep whenever he needed to. He would have been more worried if he'd had trouble sleeping. Knowing that he hadn't told him that everything would be alright. At least in that area of his life.

The next several days were busy. Frank kept them all busy. So busy that none of them had time to dwell on anything for any significant length of time. But they were far from bored. One of the ways the Spartan-III's were being re-purposed was to undergo training as Shadows.

On the first day of the training, Yoru, Schwarz and Kara Teams were all gathered, and told to stand and listen. Kelly and Ralf walked through the ranks wearing what for each of them was full kit. Frank demanded that they listen for the differences and, before it was

done, Fred, at least, could hear it.

"MJOLNIR armor is heavy, no matter what version of it you are wearing." Frank explained to them. "Half a ton in some cases. That's why no one can wear it unless they have skeletal augmentations. But a Shadow's armor weighs in at a couple of hundred pounds, and that is the weight of the generators at your back. Without the generators, as you do not currently have any part of Shadow armor, you have to deal with the weight of your weapons. Four knives, one energy dagger, and the lightest pistol in today's military. Put them, and the armor on a scale without the generators, and you are looking at less than a hundred pounds."

It was good to see Frank as she began to weave Shadow training into Spartans. Two nights into the new training, at the nightly staff meeting, she looked around at them all.

"They will have the best of both worlds." she predicted. "A Spartan cannot be a shadow. But a Shadow can not be a Spartan. We can incorporate the two, and make something incredible!"

"A Spadow." Alexander suggested. His face was deadpan, but his eyes twinkled.

"Exactly." she agreed immediately. "And that is what the UNSC needs. A tank that can strike completely unseen."

The more he thought about it â€¦ the more Fred thought that this impossible dream wasn't so impossible after all.

## 9. Chapter 8

Shadows

by UNSCShadow-105

AUTHOR'S NOTE: You know (or should) what belongs to the official Halo peeps (that's 343 these days, right?). The Shadows and at least the names of the 21 Gamma Company Spartan-III's belong to me, as do the Shadows. I write until the Muses release me from their headlock. Sometimes that means one thousand words, and sometimes it means a hundred thousand words. I am but the Muses mouthpiece. If you think having Cortana in your head can be interesting â€¦ that's nothing compared to my reality!

It took almost a week for anything dramatic to happen. At morning muster, Fred noticed that one of the men was shaking. He wasn't the only one to see it, either. Nor was the man the only one of the Spartan-III's shaking. But it was Frank who called the Spartan out.

"Talib-G191, front and center." she barked, and he did so, noticeably stiff and tense.

Frank stood a meter away from him, then looked him up and down. Talib-G191 wasn't the largest of the Gamma Spartans, but he was still a head and shoulders taller than Frank and wider than she was as well.

"Why are you shaking, Talib?" she stopped her scan and looked up at him. "Are you still upset over yesterdays loss?"

The day before had been the first game of Capture the Flag in Camp Liberty. Yoru, Schwarz and Kara Teams had all performed wonderfully, but only one team could win, and that team had been Schwarz Team. Talib-G191 had been the most upset of the losing Sparten-III's, and at the evening meeting, Frank guessed that he may be having trouble holding on to his temper. It was something that they had been on the lookout for. Good training taught them control, but without the medication, it was likely that they would have to learn the skill again, almost from the beginning.

He paused, but finally replied. "No, ma'am. I'm fine."

After a two second pause, Frank spoke, her voice a degree cooler. "One hour extra duty for lying to your commanding officer."

Talib closed his eyes, and now Fred could see that he was holding onto his temper. With both hands. "I'm fine, ma'am." he repeated.

"Going for two. Well you got it, Spartan." Frank growled. She turned to the rest of the Gamma Spartans. "Do not lie to me! Ever!" she barked. "You are all going through this. It's like you want to rip the heads off of the shoulders of anyone for any reason. I know. I've been expecting this." she looked up and down the rows. "Weakness is in fighting your nature. Embrace it. Make it ..."

Fred saw it, and knew that Chief Mendez, Kelly, Alexander and Ralf had as well. Talib had all but coiled up like a snake before he struck out at Frank. But he wound up sprawled on the ground. Frank had used her own lightening fast reflexes to, very simply and calmly, step backward, and out of his way.

Barely glancing down, Frank began to pace, ignoring Talib. "Is anyone else feeling particularly suicidal today?" she asked the Gammas.

No one replied, but that may have been because Talib had regained his feet and charged again, this time with a roar of anger and frustration that Fred could feel. Chief Mendez took a step towards him, but Fred gave him a subtle hand gesture, and saw Alexander doing the same. This was the C.O's responsibility. And the psychiatrists.

Even though Frank's back was to Talib, she undoubtedly heard the roar. From her position, she launched herself up, back and over Talib. The Gamma Spartan-III once again found himself face first in the dirt.

Landing in a graceful crouch, Frank's voice was not even winded. She kept three fingers lightly on the ground, and one of her legs was behind her. "Stop acting like a blind and drunken Jiralhanae whining over the death of his Mommy! You are better than those animals. Use that aggression for more than reminding me of fights I used to have with Fred when we were five!"

Inwardly, Fred flinched. Outwardly he narrowly avoided a grin. The Gamma's had not been told of the relationship between he and his

twin. As sharp as Frank guessed them to be, they had figured it out on their own. But not a word had been said about it, as far as he knew. Now she used her relationship to taunt Talib into attacking her. Into channeling rage that he felt he could not control.

He felt a bit of pride in his twin sister that he'd never felt for any but his fellow Spartan-II's well within him.

Talib turned, still looking almost out of his mind with rage. But he did not strike. His eyes cleared just a bit, and his trembling was clearly visible. Fred could hear the young Spartans breathing from his position almost ten meters away with his bare ears.

It took him almost five seconds to begin to stand, and Frank stood with him. He stood, still trembling as she slowly approached him. "I said use it, not grab it and stuff it in some foot locker in the back of your mind!" she barked.

He looked pained. "I don't want to hurt you, Major." his voice was just the side of a plea.

"Very considerate of you." Frank conceded. "But you couldn't hurt me unless you hit me with the Warthog." she took two quick steps towards him. "So let me take you by the hand, and guide you through the finer points of following orders, Spartan." and as the last word left her mouth, she sprang at him, bringing her legs in front of her, hitting Talib squarely in the chest, and knocking at least some of the air out of his lungs.

As he hit the ground, being caught off guard, she used his chest as a board to push herself off of him again, turning as she landed, so she was facing him. The move reminded Fred of the first time he'd met the Shadows — met her. Or thought he was first meeting her.

Talib rolled over, and glared at Frank. But he didn't strike at her blindly, which Fred suspected that move was supposed to do. Invoke more ire for the seventeen year old Spartan to cope with. Poking the sleeping dragon of the potential psychopathy that lay dormant in all of the Gamma's.

Frank smiled very slightly. "Good. Very good. Redirect it." she both praised and suggested. "Use it. Stop being used by it."

He inhaled very deeply and walked to Frank, who did not back away. She assumed a fighting stance, and was ready when Talib sent a fist in her direction. That's why he missed with the first jab, but he followed up and got her with the second, sending her flying up and back.

She landed on her feet, jaws clenched against any pain he may have caused her. Dancing forward, she leapt and got him with a kick to the face and, landing behind him, used her legs to sweep his out from under him.

Talib landed with a thud and a grunt, but regained his feet in less than a second. Fred could see his eyes were even clearer now. He was gaining the upper hand. Being the taller and stronger opponent, he pushed up with his hands and kicked out with one foot, connecting with Frank's rib cage.

A grunt escaped her as she was thrown a few meters distant. She recovered instantly, and if she was hurt, Fred could not tell. But now she was grinning. Running a few steps she again lunched herself into the air, but this time Talib was ready. He caught her foot and swung her around twice, finally letting her go flying through the air towards Fred.

He stiffened slightly but did not move. Frank spun herself in mid-air, and connected with Fred's chest. Using his solid frame, she pushed herself back towards Talib. Of course, she only flew about three meters before she landed, rolled and began a series of acrobatic moves that caused Talib pause. That pause let Frank land herself feet first into the younger mans face.

The blood began to flow instantly. Frank had broken his nose. But Talib did not stop. A broken nose would not even register in a Spartan-III. He landed on his back, and rolled immediately onto his feet. Striking out again, he made contact with Frank's solar plexus. But she grabbed his arm, and employing some variation on the shrimping technique, she threw him over her shoulder and face first into the ground at her feet. She lept onto his back and pinned him.

"One. Two. Three!" came Mendez's voice. "Match goes to Major Frank-105."

Frank jumped off of Talib immediately, and even offered him her tiny hand. He accepted it, and stood. Blood flowed freely from his nose, but he was smiling.

"I won the match, but you won the battle, Talib-G191." she looked up at him. "Good job." she patted him on the shoulder, and nodded for him to get back into ranks. Once he had, she stood before them all. "I do believe this is a lesson to us all." she announced. "Pair off and spar, Spartans! Use it! Control it! Dismissed!"

As they paired off, and headed towards the boxing ring that Mendez and Ralf had set up only the day before, Mendez approached Frank. Kelly, Alexander, Ralf and Fred surrounded her.

"You okay?" Ralf asked, but he was grinning.

"Oh, I'm fine." Frank told him.

"So they can't lie to you, but you can lie to yourself?" Alexander scoffed.

"Fine is a matter of interpretation, Alexander." she retorted with a chuckle. She looked over at Mendez. "Thank you for that countdown. I am not twenty-five anymore." and she winked.

"My pleasure, Major." Mendez smiled, and pulled out a cigar. "That was impressive. If I was twenty years younger..."

Scoffing, Frank nodded to the Gammas as they gathered by the ring. "Get em organized, Chief."

Nodding once, he then snapped a salute. "Ma'am yes ma'am." and he jogged across the compound.

Frank turned to Kelly. "I think that kid broke one of my nails." she shook her head. "How inconsiderate. Think you could help me glue it back on?"

Kelly almost giggled, very rare thing indeed. "Sure. I think I have some fluorescent pink polish left over from my last mission. You'll love it." and they walked off.

Alexander looked at Fred, and shook his head, grinning from ear to ear. "Beat 'em till they're sane! Shadow Psychiatry. Gotta love it!"

## 10. Chapter 09

Shadows

by UNSCShadow-105

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And SO SO Sorry for the long time between chapters. Real life got in my way in a major way and still is. But I am still working on this and will continue to post! I thank you for your patience!

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Shadow psychiatry did indeed involve a great deal of violence, but it also involved more traditional things as well. Once a week, for two hours, Frank met with each one of the Spartan-III's privately. Usually it consisted of a long walk away from the camp. While she had the Pelican to use as an office, she didn't use it for that purpose when it came to the Gamma's.

One month into re-purposing, the Spartan-III's seemed to be getting back to 'normal'. The bursts of aggression were coming fewer and further between. But the sparring matches continued. Everyone enjoyed them, especially when the Spartan-III's were matched against their superior officers. But the most popular seemed to be when the veterans sparred against each other. It almost qualified as entertainment, as well as being a learning experience.

Fred thought of none of this when he donned his MJOLNIR armor for the first time since initially arriving on Emerald Cove. The request had come from the Spartan-III's that he spar with Frank, and the Major had agreed.

Being in his armor, Fred unquestionably outpowered Frank. The MJOLNIR armor was superior in every possible way to the Shadows armor. Despite this, Frank insisted she was ready, although they did agree not to kill each other. But Fred was worried, regardless. Not because Frank was his sister, as it turned out, but because he knew how much

more powerful he was with the armor on. He kept reminding himself that he'd seen Shadows kill Jiralhanae, but he also remembered that Spartan-II's had helped in those kills.

Standing in the small parade ground of the camp, Frank had explained that it was not easy to take down a Spartan-II, but it could be done. The first example she used was chemical attack, the strategy that had proved the most effective against Spartan-II's. Other options included strategies that were not usually employed by Shadows. High caliber weapons, missiles and explosives. In other words, she concluded, if one could not get past the shields, a Spartan-II was effectively safe against a Shadow.

"However, all of this is conjecture based on our research." she explained. "Shadows have never targeted Spartan-II's."

Frank opened her mouth to say more, but the voice of Erebus-7 boomed through the camp. Usually the Shadow AI kept a low profile, only announcing himself in the form of one of the bugle calls and announcements that were used within the Army camp. In many ways, it made hearing the AI's voice caused you to pay attention.

"Major Frank." the deep voice intoned. "I would like a word, please."

The request was very polite, but the fact that the voice was being heard at all suggested that the AI needed a word, and quickly. Usually, he saved anything he had to say for the nightly briefings.

"Of course, Erebus-7." Frank replied with brows arched in curiosity. She turned to Chief Mendez. "Give the Spartans their test. That sparring match will have to wait, I'm afraid." and she turned and walked towards the Pelican as if she had all the time in the world.

Every Spartan passed, even though Mendez did trip them up by inserting chemical compounds that were harmless into the ones that were not and throwing in non-existent ones, just for his own amusement.

Frank returned within half an hour and nodded when Mendez told her that the Spartan-III's had passed her test with flying colors.

"Outstanding. I'm very proud of you." she smiled at them. "As reward, I think a nice relaxing afternoon is in order." she considered a moment. "Yes! I think I will put it to all of you to hunt down dinner. My personal favorite is shellfish. Dismissed."

An afternoon of 'hunting dinner' translated into an afternoon of swimming, surfing, snorkeling and other assorted water games. The Gamma's wasted no time getting on the task. Mendez, and all of the officers were alone in seconds. Fred removed his head gear and looked at the Major.

Frank's smile vanished as if it had never been there. "My office Now. We got problems."

They all walked with her to the Pelican, and once they were all



seated, Frank surprised them all by not only closing the back hatch, but securing the Pelican from eavesdroppers as well. She'd never done that before, and it added volumes to her meaning when she said they had problems.

On the trunk that served as an office coffee table was a disk. Frank sat around it with the others and looked at them, focusing on her Shadows. "I got a note from Maureen." she stated.

The Shadows nodded. "She's been very quiet this mission. What's the problem she's reporting?" Alexander asked.

Frank sighed, and took in Fred, Kelly and Chief Mendez. "Maureen is an AI I created when I was twelve. She started out as a challenge to see if I could break into other computers and gather information without being detected, never mind caught."

"She's a work of art." Ralf's voice was filled with admiration.

"I thought Shadows didn't use computers." Kelly arched an brow, and eyed the disk on the table.

"To keep records, no. But some things we keep in our AI's. Maureen isn't a 'dumb' AI, but she isn't a 'smart' one either." Alexander explained. "I guess you could call her â€¦ an autistic AI." he ventured.

Fred arched his brows. "Autistic â€¦" he couldn't picture it. "You mean smart in some areas, but dumb in others?"

Alexander nodded, but Frank replied. "She is exceptional in her areas of expertise, but is not limited to them. And she is capable of learning, and making many of the same leaps that smart AI's make without requiring a cloned brain or a ship to power." she paused. "For example, she has all of my knowledge. Everything I have imported into her since I was twelve years old." she glanced at Fred. "That's one of the reasons I never forgot you. Maureen kept my memories for me. But what I don't know, she can learn, as long as I teach it to her. And if she learns something she believes I need to know, she writes me a note that very few would be able to understand. That avoids the security hazards of encryption."

The Spartans and Mendez were nodding slowly. "So what is this trouble?" Mendez seemed to want to cut to the chase.

Frank reached for the disk and pressed a small button. "Shadow Francis-105. Authorization code is two two twenty-five eleven Maureen's Musings ten thirteen twenty-five twenty-three." she began. "Play latest message to mother."

Pixels began to swirl up from the disk, and in about five seconds had materialized into the figure of a young girl of about six years old. It was obviously a representation of Frank when she was that age. She was barefoot, dressed in a long pink nightshirt and was hugging a teddy bear tightly to her, while turning slightly to her left and right as a restless child might.

Before Fred realized he was talking, he'd blinked. "Hey, that's mine!" he protested as that memory all but bowled him over.

Glancing up at him, Frank shrugged. "I know." her voice was mildly amused, but that quickly vanished when Maureen began to speak.

"Hello, mama." the young voice sang. "I have news of cousin Nero. Do you remember him? You told me not to forget him He still looks like he's sixty-six years old, though." the child pulled a face, as if sixty-six was age beyond reason. "Some of the things you were afraid of happened, but he's alive." Maureen's face turned sad. "He's been lonely, and he's still a grumpy puss meanie face. He picks the wrong friends, and that's not right." she nodded with the complete conviction of children. "One convinced him to do bad things." she leaned forward slightly, and her voice lowered to a little girls conspiratorial whisper. "To kill the monsters that he thought were like poor sick puppies and kittens that had to be put to sleep for ever and ever. And he almost did it, too. But some of the puppies and kittens escaped. Now he will probably hunt them down himself." Maureen straightened. "There may be more later. I have to check some more things. I better sign off now. When I can, I have more I will report in person." and the avatar dissolved into swirling pixels that lowered back into the disk.

Ralf and Alexander both swore softly, but Mendez looked over to Frank. "That thing is \_creepy\_." he stated.

"So was I, when I was a kid." Frank shrugged.

"What does the message \_mean\_, Frank?" Kelly also looked a little startled by the avatar.

"Spartans are our cousins." Ralf murmured. "That part was easy." he looked over at Frank. "Who is she programed to spy on that's code named Nero?"

Frank sighed deeply and looked at Chief Mendez. "Spartan Soren-066." she replied.

Chief Mendez started at the sound of the name, and then swore. "I \_told\_ her that he was a threat." he growled. "But she \_had\_ to believe that he was just a poor little lost soul that just needed \_direction\_."

"Another Spartan brought back from the dead?" Fred tried, and failed to keep bitterness out of his voice.

Mendez rubbed at his temples. "He wasn't \_lucky\_ enough to die." he dropped his face into his hands. "The augmentations turned him into â€¦. he washed out." and he groaned. "And then he washed out of washing out. He became an innie sympathizer." his voice was muffled by his hands.

Frank stood, and sat between Mendez and Fred. She patted the Chief's shoulder, then folded her hands between her knees. "It was a comedy of errors that wasn't even \_remotely\_ amusing." she sighed. "But none of it \_Mendez's\_ fault."

"So it's Dr \_Halsey's\_ fault?" Kelly was sneering, which surprised Fred. "Again? Ma'am." the final word was out and out defiant. Never had Fred heard Kelly put so much disrespect into that one word.

Turning her head, Frank looked across Fred's body at Kelly. "I won't count all the ways, but at the very least she could have gotten him a therapist." she all but hissed at Kelly. "So yes, I put this at the good doctors feet, right along with a mountain of other things that she should have done. Could have done. But didn't do because of her goddamned sociopathy!"

Kelly stood, but Frank didn't. The Spartan-II did not speak another word, she simply moved to the Pelicans controls, opened the hatch and left.

Frank blew out a breath. "Very long story short," her voice was quiet even in the deafening silence that Kelly left behind her. "Soren-066 was presumed dead on Reach in twenty-five twenty-seven, then again in twenty-five fifty-two when Reach was glassed. But there is still no body."

"A lot of people died when Reach fell." Fred murmured, still stunned at Kelly's behavior.

"You didn't." Frank replied, turning her head to look at him.

The words hit Fred hard, but he recovered and sighed. "He's an insurrectionist sympathizer." he tried gain, knowing that some part of him was making excuses. For Soren, who he could barely remember. And even for Kelly, who needed to believe in Dr Halsey.

"He was an insurrectionist sympathizer." Alexander replied. "It's not impossible that he isn't so much an insurrectionist as simply a man who harbors deep seated resentment towards the UNSC in general." he paused, and looked at Fred. "Washing out is not as easy as it looks, Fred. I've been there. I hated the UNSC. Hated Dr Halsey. Hated you and Kelly and Joshua and John and Kurt and Linda and Grace and everyone else who succeeded where I had failed. But I got what most of the other washouts didn't get." he paused, and did not speak again until Fred was looking directly into his dark eyes. "I got therapy. Spartans are expected to just deal with all of this crap and work it out however they can." he blew out a frustrated breath. "How can that not ultimately drive someone insane, even if the way it manifests itself is in unswerving loyalty to the very people that created us in the first place?"

Fred sighed deeply, and ran a hand through his hair. "So Soren hates the UNSC in general and €| Spartans in particular?"

"Probably." Frank replied. "If somehow he learned about the Spartan-III's and saw them as..." her hands made circles at the ends of her wrists. "Helpless puppies and kittens that he had to put down for their own good." she looked up, and made eye contact just like Alexander had done. "And he set Zaroff on them. But only three quarters of them were killed. There are twenty-one left. Here." she blinked, and her look intensified. "And I don't care if he is the strongest Spartan-II to ever be created. I will not let him at the men and women under my command."

End  
file.